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The Guitar Magazine

JANUARY 2019 VOL 30 NO 4

GEAR OF THE YEAR

OVER 60 BEST-BUY GUITARS, AMPS & EFFECTS

STARRING

- Fender
- Marshall
- Eastman
- Taylor
- Lazy J
- Orange
- Lowden & more

WIN! 3 ERNIE BALL PEDALS WORTH £597

BERNIE MARSDEN'S LES PAUL

KURT VILE ON FENDER JAGUARS

1964 GIBSON FIREBIRD VII

THE OTHERWORLDLY MERIS ENZO

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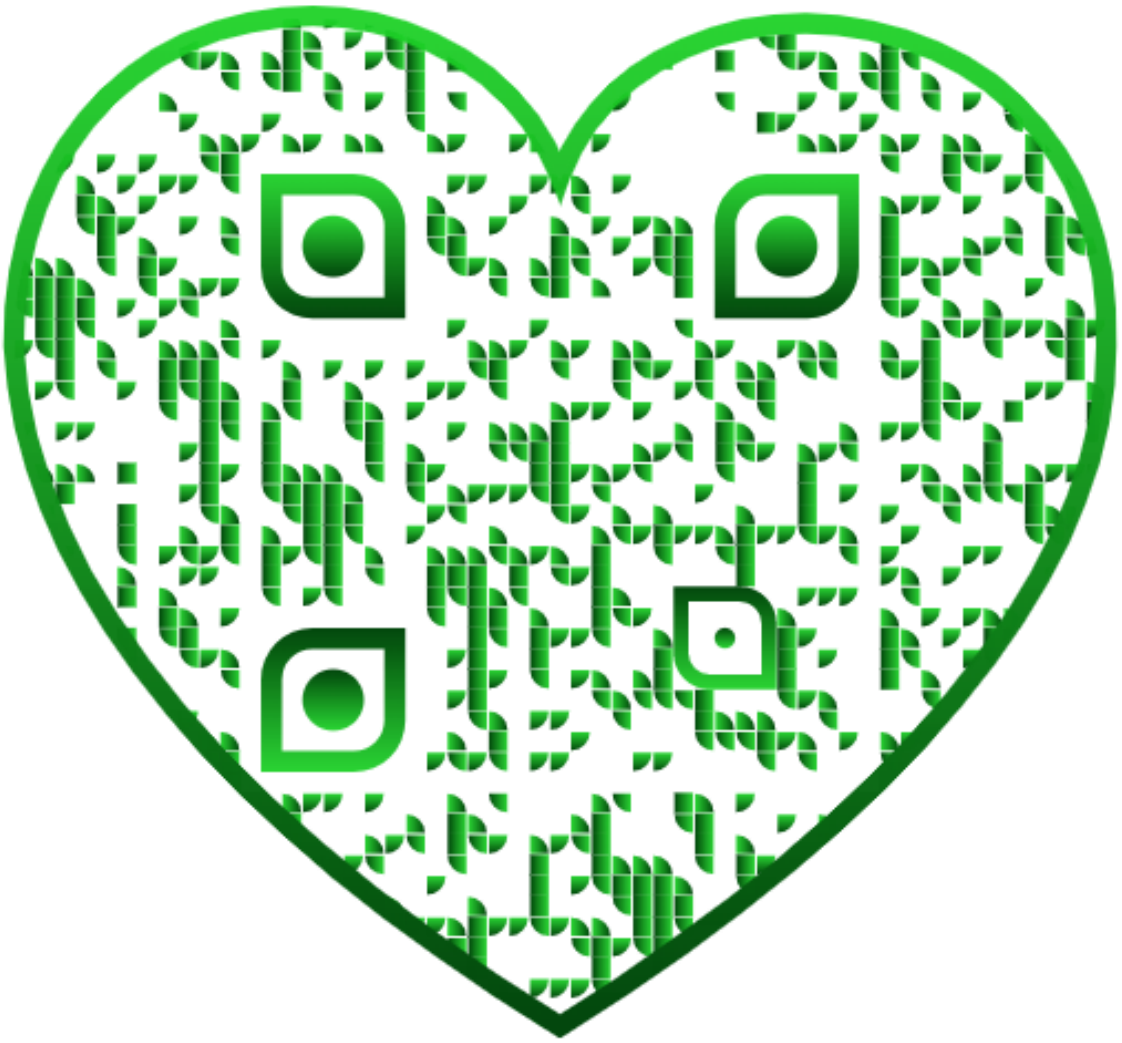

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Forward Thinking

As we reach the end of 2018, the thoughts of all guitar journalists turn to the upcoming Winter NAMM Show in Anaheim, California and the inevitable question: what will 2019 mean for the guitar? In terms of products, expect recent industry trends – such as wireless functionality, app control and the use of torrefied and reclaimed timbers – to feature prominently. And just as regulations on the import and export of wood have impacted on the materials from which our instruments are made, 2019's political climate will undoubtedly have an influence on pricing, too, as the industry prepares for further fallout from Brexit and potential trade wars.

From fledgling players to luthiers, to rock stars and social media influencers, the guitar industry is a more diverse and geographically disparate group of people than ever before. Yet conversely, the global guitar community is more connected than ever. That can only be a positive force, and it's a community we plan to play an even bigger part in during the year ahead and beyond.

By the time you read this, our new online home will be up and running at Guitar.com. Much more than simply a magazine website, Guitar.com will be the world's leading authority and resource for all things guitar. We'll provide insight and opinion about gear, artists, technique and the guitar industry for all genres and skill levels, so head to Guitar.com today, take a look around and let myself and the rest of the team know what you think.

And don't worry, with all this talk of the digital world, we haven't forgotten about analogue! There's plenty to look forward to for loyal readers of the print magazine, with cool free gifts, bonus supplements, special editions and much more planned for the coming months. Without further ado, then, it's time for me to wish you a Happy New Year... it's going to be a busy one!

Chris Vinnicombe Editor
chris@guitar.com

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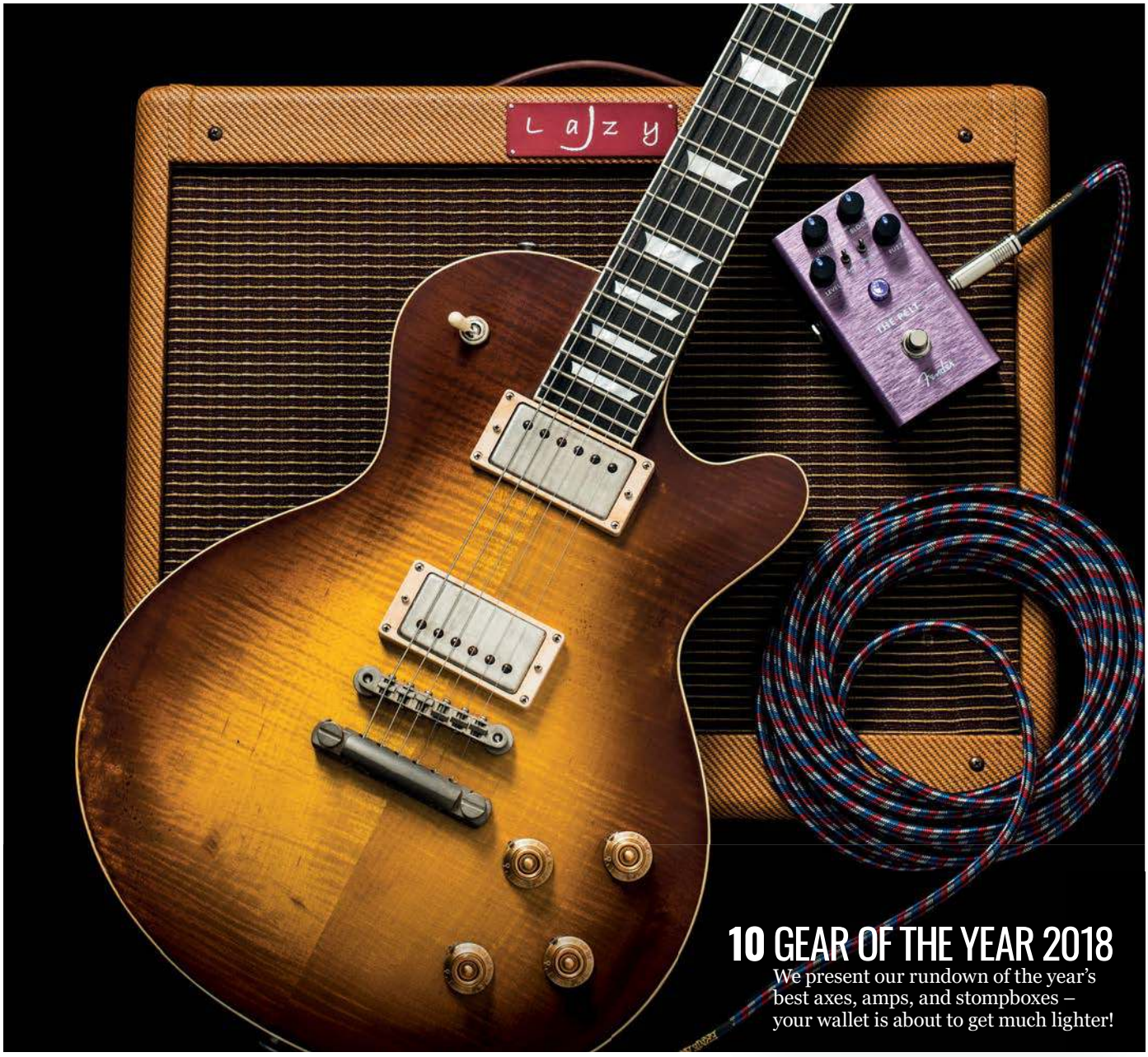

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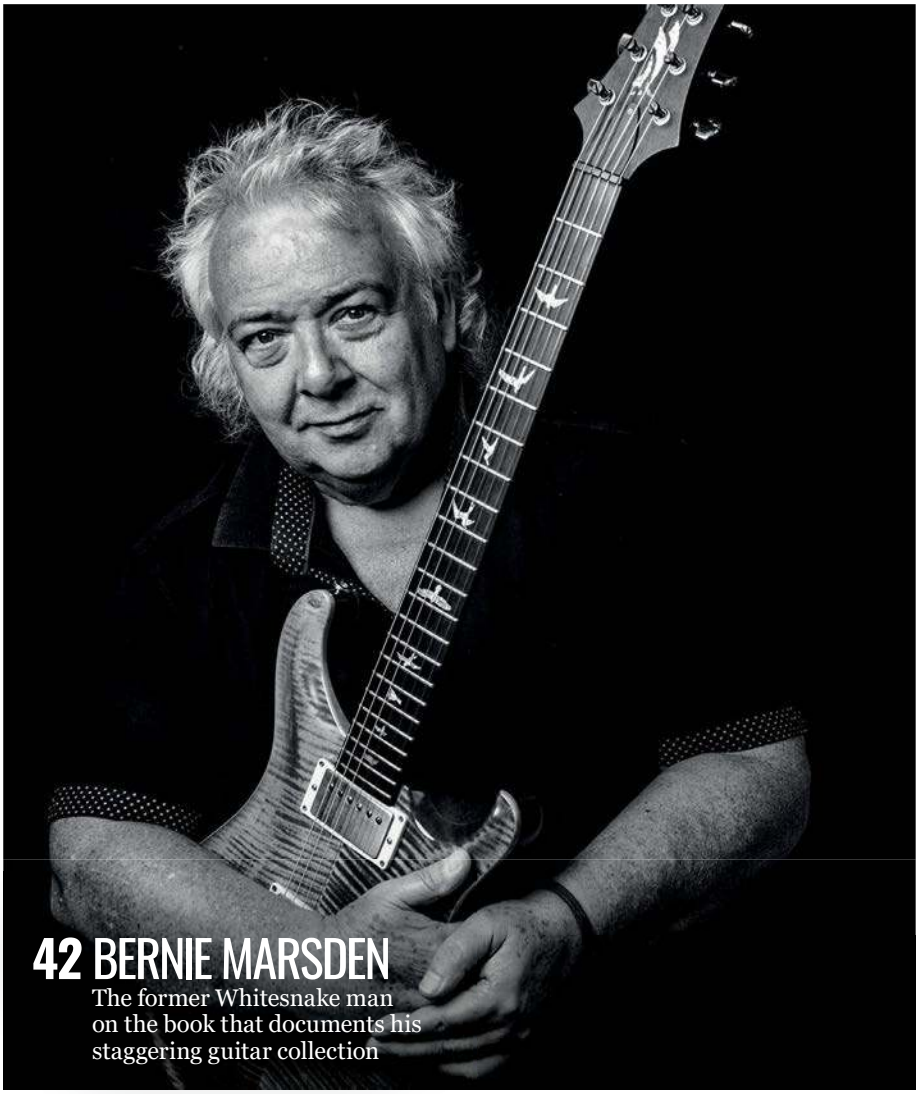

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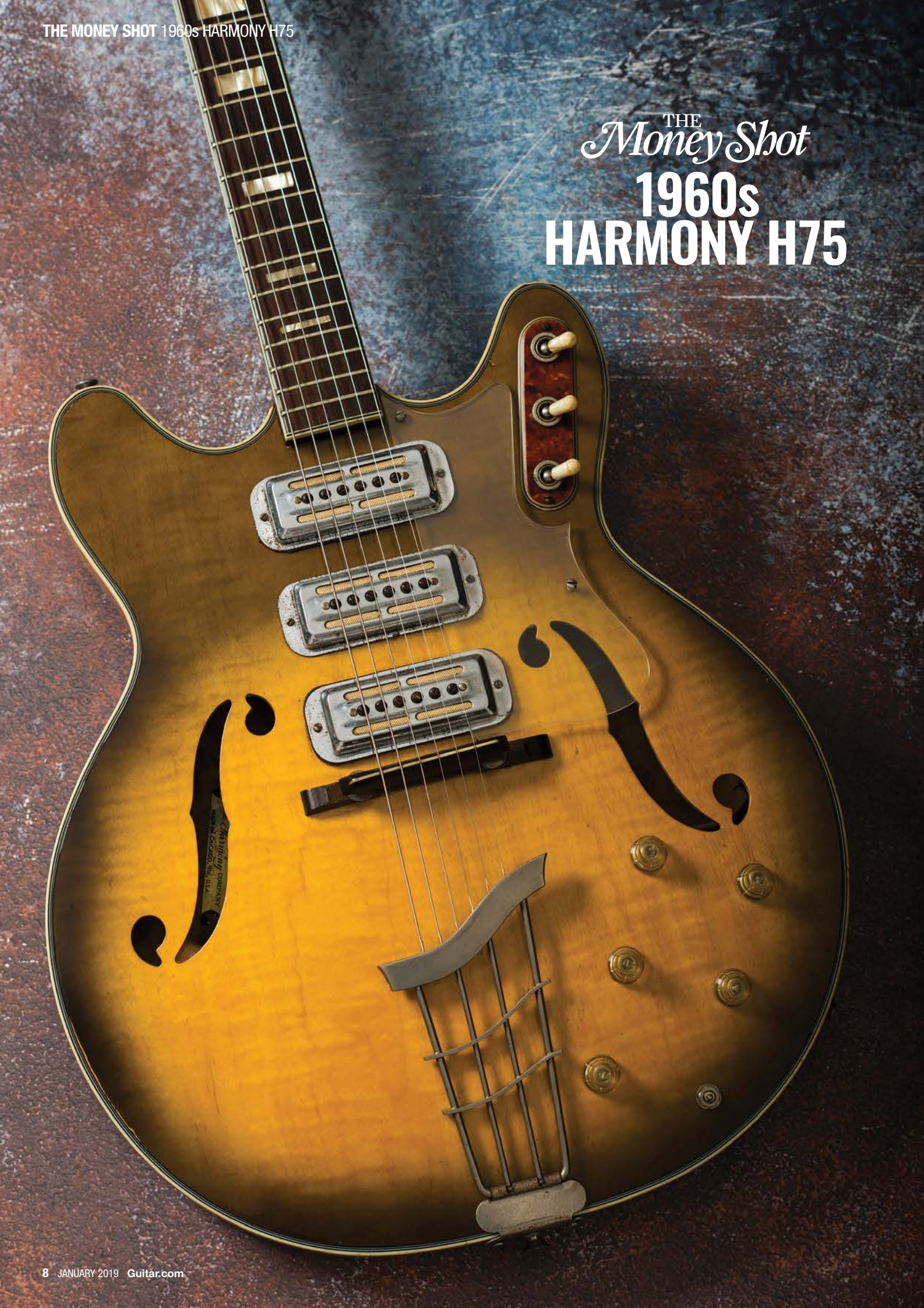


THE *Money Shot*

1960s HARMONY H75

We regularly share vintage instruments with you from our friends at Gardiner Houlgate Guitar Auctions in Corsham, but while the celebrity guitars such as George Harrison's Maton Mastersound MS500 grab the headlines, there's no end of affordable old pieces on offer, and plenty of bargains to be had. This 1960s Harmony H75 – estimated to fetch £500-700 when it goes on sale on 12 December 2018 – is one such example.

Manufactured in Chicago in the early 1960s, this thinline hollowbody is very similar to one favoured by Black Keys star Dan Auerbach and bristles with a trio of sought-after DeArmond Gold Foil pickups. Harmony's classificiation system worked as follows: the H75 featured a brown sunburst finish and a 'harp' tailpiece, while the H76 came with a Bigsby. The H77 had the 'harp' tailpiece and a red sunburst finish, while the red-burst H78 was fitted with a Bigsby. The understandably rarer H79 was a 12-string model.

Our H75 features the usual embarrassment of switches and knobs, and while one pot shaft is damaged and the original tortoiseshell cellulose pickguard has been replaced with a clear-plastic alternative, this is still a very vibey beast, as our demo on youtube.com/theguitarmagazine proves. Visit guitar-auctions.co.uk for more.

GEAR OF THE YEAR 2018

Even in these uncertain times, you can still rely on the primal thrill of wood and steel and the sheer unadulterated joy of making music. 2018 has been a very good year indeed for new guitars, amplifiers, effects and accessories. Across the following pages, we present the ultimate must-try and best-buy gear of the year, as chosen by our expert panel of reviewers...

LAZY
THE PELT
Fender

PREMIUM ELECTRIC GUITARS

IF MONEY IS NO OBJECT, YOUR SHOPPING LIST STARTS HERE, WITH OUR MUST-TRY ELECTRICS FROM £2,000 UPWARDS

LOWDEN GL-10 KOA

- **PRICE** £3,395
- **REVIEWED** August 2018
- **VISIT www.lowdenguitars.com**

Stellar materials and build quality? Check. Effortless playability? Check. Extraordinary sustain and inspiring tones? Check. Basking in the halo of such effusive praise, you'd be forgiven for thinking that George Lowden was an old master at the electric-guitar-building game. In reality, the GL-10 isn't just the first solidbody that George has designed in four decades, it's also Lowden's first-ever production electric. Despite ferocious competition in this category, the Lowden GL-10 is our Premium Electric Guitar of 2018 because of the way in which the company has somehow imbued the organic spirit of its acoustic models into this original, inspiring electric-guitar design that has an almost sculptural beauty as a three-dimensional object.

WE SAID "This may be Lowden's first attempt at bringing an electric guitar to market, but the company has hit the ground running with the GL-10."

RECOMMENDED

FRANK BROTHERS ARCADE MODEL

- **PRICE** £3,120
- **REVIEWED** December 2018
- **VISIT frankbrothersguitars.com**

WE SAID "Proof that Frank Brothers is much more than a one-hit wonder, the Arcade Model sees vintage meet modern with a level of style and substance that few can match."

GRETSCH G6118T-135 ANNIVERSARY LIMITED EDITION

- **PRICE** £2,259
- **REVIEWED** June 2018
- **VISIT gretschguitars.com**

WE SAID "A blend of classic and modern Gretsch features designed for the contemporary player who appreciates vintage tone and looks."

PRS SILVER SKY

- **PRICE** £2,299
- **REVIEWED** May 2018
- **VISIT prsguitars.com**

WE SAID "More than simply a signature guitar for a superstar, the Silver Sky is a successful marriage of the electric guitar's past and present that can do the job on any stage."

COLLINGS I-30 LC

- **PRICE** £5,099
- **REVIEWED** August 2018
- **VISIT collingsguitars.com**

WE SAID "Much more than simply a downsized, boutique take on an ES-330, the I-30 has a personality of its own that offers much to love."

FRIEDMAN VINTAGE-T

- **PRICE** £2,299
- **REVIEWED** October 2018
- **VISIT friedmanamplification.com**

WE SAID "A professional workhorse with thoroughbred DNA, this easy-playing hotrod will appeal to hard-rockers and vintage fans alike."

VIGIER EXPERT CLASSIC ROCK

- **PRICE** £2,269
- **REVIEWED** March 2018
- **VISIT vigierguitars.com**

WE SAID "The excellent playability and versatile tones – plus a raft of modern features – make the Expert a guitar to be reckoned with."

XOTIC CALIFORNIA CLASSIC XSC-1

- **PRICE** £3,099
- **REVIEWED** December 2018
- **VISIT xotic.us**

WE SAID "Despite formidable competition, Xotic's variation on the classic formula sounds and feels like a pro-spec instrument should."

PREMIUM ACOUSTIC GUITARS

THE FINEST ACOUSTIC GUITARS THAT MONEY CAN BUY FROM THE LAST 12 MONTHS

TAYLOR BUILDER'S EDITION K14CE V-CLASS

- **PRICE** £5,759
- **REVIEWED** March 2018
- **VISIT taylorguitars.com**

We've been lucky enough to play a lot of beautiful acoustic guitars this year, but when it came to weighing up this category, there was only one winner. Projection, clarity, tremendous and haunting sustain, vibrant and complex harmonics… all of these characteristics are the hallmarks of the world's finest acoustic instruments, but V-Class also brings a level of tuning and intonation accuracy that unlocks a world of possibilities for recording. We can't wait to see where Taylor will take the V-Class next…

WE SAID "An original and imaginative redesign of the structure of the acoustic guitar that has resulted in the finest six-string Taylor we've ever played."

The Guitar Magazine 2018 GEAR OF THE YEAR WINNER

RECOMMENDED

LOWDEN S-35C 12 FRET CO/AD

- **PRICE** £5,515
- **REVIEWED** May 2018
- **VISIT lowdenguitars.com**

WE SAID "A brighter Lowden tone with unfeasibly deep bass for the body size, that gives tremendous complexity and clarity."

MARTIN D-41 REIMAGINED

- **PRICE** £4,150
- **REVIEWED** November 2018
- **VISIT martinguitar.com**

WE SAID "A superb example of the dreadnought design that makes it a viable option for players of all styles who demand the highest quality."

BREEDLOVE FRONTIER CONCERTO E

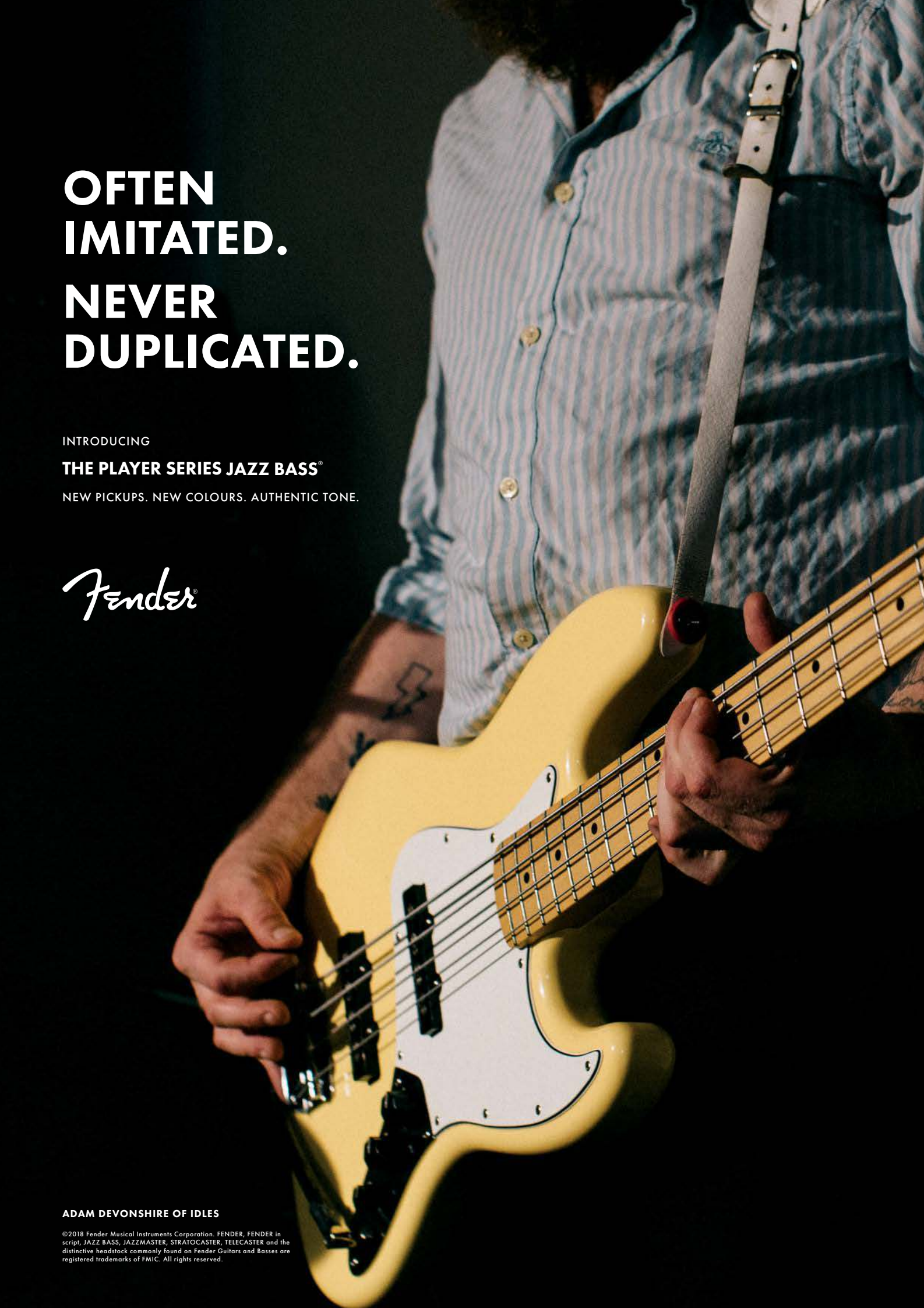
- **PRICE** £3,049
- **REVIEWED** March 2018
- **VISIT breedlovemusic.com**

WE SAID "A hugely impressive and individual take on the dreadnought formula that offers superb tone and playability."

LARSON BROS PRAIRIE STATE OM STYLE 2 VS 1900

- **PRICE** £2,440
- **REVIEWED** May 2018
- **VISIT larsonbros.com**

WE SAID "This is a truly inspiring instrument with authentic vintage tonality, tremendous volume, power and bass response."



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PREMIUM AMPLIFIERS

£1,500 OR MORE TO SPEND? HERE ARE THE SUPERCARS OF THE GUITAR-AMP WORLD...

LAZY J J10LC

- **PRICE** £2,516
- **REVIEWED** April 2018
- **VISIT lazyjprojects.com**

A rundown of Jesse Hoff's clients reads like a laundry list of pro players renowned for their taste and tone. The J10LC is an emphatic demonstration of why… A push-pull amplifier combining the preamp of his much-loved J20 with a 10-watt output stage, the J10 – here in its 5E3-sized 'large cab' configuration – comes with a 12-inch Celestion Blue alnico speaker and VAC power scaling, and our review model came fully loaded with optional extras, including footswitchable spring reverb and tremolo modules. We used it for home practice, recording and even gigging, and found it bristling with a plethora of harmonically rich tweed-inspired tones, from haunting cleans to Neil Young-style meltdown. The best amp we've played in many years, let alone just in 2018.

WE SAID "A great way to get vintage 5E3-style tones and dynamics at sensible volume levels, while the optional effects are a real bonus."

RECOMMENDED

SUPRO 1685RT NEPTUNE REVERB

- **PRICE** £1,499
- **REVIEWED** March 2018
- **VISIT suprousa.com**

WE SAID "A quirky amp with plenty of power and a core tone that's easy to love."

SWART ANTARES

- **PRICE** £2,099
- **REVIEWED** March 2018
- **VISIT swartamps.com**

WE SAID "Another incredible Swart amp, and with the big cabinet and voicing switch, it may be our favourite so far."

RIFT AMPLIFICATION HAWKER

- **PRICE** £2,299
- **REVIEWED** August 2018
- **VISIT riftamps.com**

WE SAID "As a first venture into ground-up amp design, the Hawker is a revelation – and any fan of classic British amps will find much to enjoy."

BARTEL AMPLIFIERS ROSELAND

- **PRICE** £4,699
- **REVIEWED** December 2018
- **VISIT bartelamps.com**

WE SAID "One of the best-sounding and most versatile amps we've ever reviewed, with a fanatical approach to every aspect. Quality costs, but the rewards are remarkable."

TWO-ROCK BLOOMFIELD DRIVE

- **PRICE** £4,499
- **REVIEWED** November 2018
- **VISIT two-rock.com**

WE SAID "Like Two-Rock's Classic Reverb Signature, this is a versatile tone sculptor of the highest order, but with more manageable power levels and a softer tonal character."

BLACK VOLT AMPLIFICATION CRAZY HORSE

- **PRICE** £2,799
- **REVIEWED** February 2018
- **VISIT blackvoltamplification.com**

WE SAID "A blend of reclaimed, new and vintage materials with vibe in spades and serious tones."

FRACTAL AUDIO SYSTEMS AXE-FX III

- **PRICE** €2,899
- **REVIEWED** August 2018
- **VISIT fractalaudio.com**

WE SAID "For vivid emulations of hundreds of amps that respond dynamically to every nuance of your playing, Fractal once again blazes a path for others to follow."

PREMIUM EFFECTS PEDALS

MODERN BOUTIQUE PEDAL MAKERS HAVE KNOCKED IT OUT OF THE PARK IN 2018, HERE ARE EIGHT OF THE BEST...

EARTHQUAKER DEVICES WESTWOOD

- **PRICE** £185
- **REVIEWED** May 2018
- **VISIT** www.earthquakerdevices.com

It takes a lot to really stand out in the world of overdrive pedals, but the Earthquaker Devices Westwood did so in such a way that we simply had to dish out a rare 10/10 when we reviewed it. The Westwood takes the venerable Ibanez Tube Screamer as its starting point, but quickly puts most other green-pedal imitators in the shade. What the Westwood offers is a wonderfully flattering and subtle natural overdrive sound that compresses like a really good Tube Screamer should thanks to its superbly effective tonestack, but without colouring the EQ in any discernible way.

There are plenty of 'transparent overdrives' out there, but the Westwood is designed to be 'translucent' – and with its sweet, smooth and responsive sound, it's one of the finest drive pedals on the market today.

WE SAID "Sweet, smooth and responsive, with a superbly effective tonestack: this is some sort of overdrive perfection."

RECOMMENDED

BEETRONICS ROYAL JELLY

- **PRICE** £289
- **REVIEWED** November 2018
- **VISIT beetronicsfx.com**

WE SAID "A well thought out and impressively musical dirt machine from this refreshing new company that keeps pushing the boundaries."

OLD BLOOD NOISE ENDEAVORS ALPHA HAUNT

- **PRICE** £219
- **REVIEWED** December 2018
- **VISIT oldbloodnoise.com**

WE SAID "An all-in-one fuzz machine that covers all the bases, from fluffy to fiendish, in some style."

MERIS POLYMOON DELAY

- **PRICE** £319
- **REVIEWED** April 2018
- **VISIT meris.us**

WE SAID "An astonishingly powerful little box that will take you tripping across the universe."

JACKSON AUDIO PRISM

- **PRICE** £259
- **REVIEWED** July 2018
- **VISIT jackson.audio**

WE SAID "A powerful and high-quality Swiss Army knife of a boost pedal that can perform a wide variety of duties in your setup."

STONE DEAF SYNCOPY

- **PRICE** £270
- **REVIEWED** September 2018
- **VISIT stonedeaffx.com**

WE SAID "A supremely versatile analogue delay that really comes alive with the addition of an expression pedal and offers huge creative potential."

THORPY FX THE DANE

- **PRICE** £249
- **REVIEWED** December 2018
- **VISIT thorpyfx.com**

WE SAID "A supremely classy stompbox that wrings a surprising amount of tweakability from just five controls."

FUZZROCIOUS CAT KING

- **PRICE** £269
- **REVIEWED** April 2018
- **VISIT fuzzrociouspedals.com**

WE SAID "More than just another high-end distortion unit, The Cat King could take care of all your gainy needs."

ACCESSORIES & STUDIO GEAR

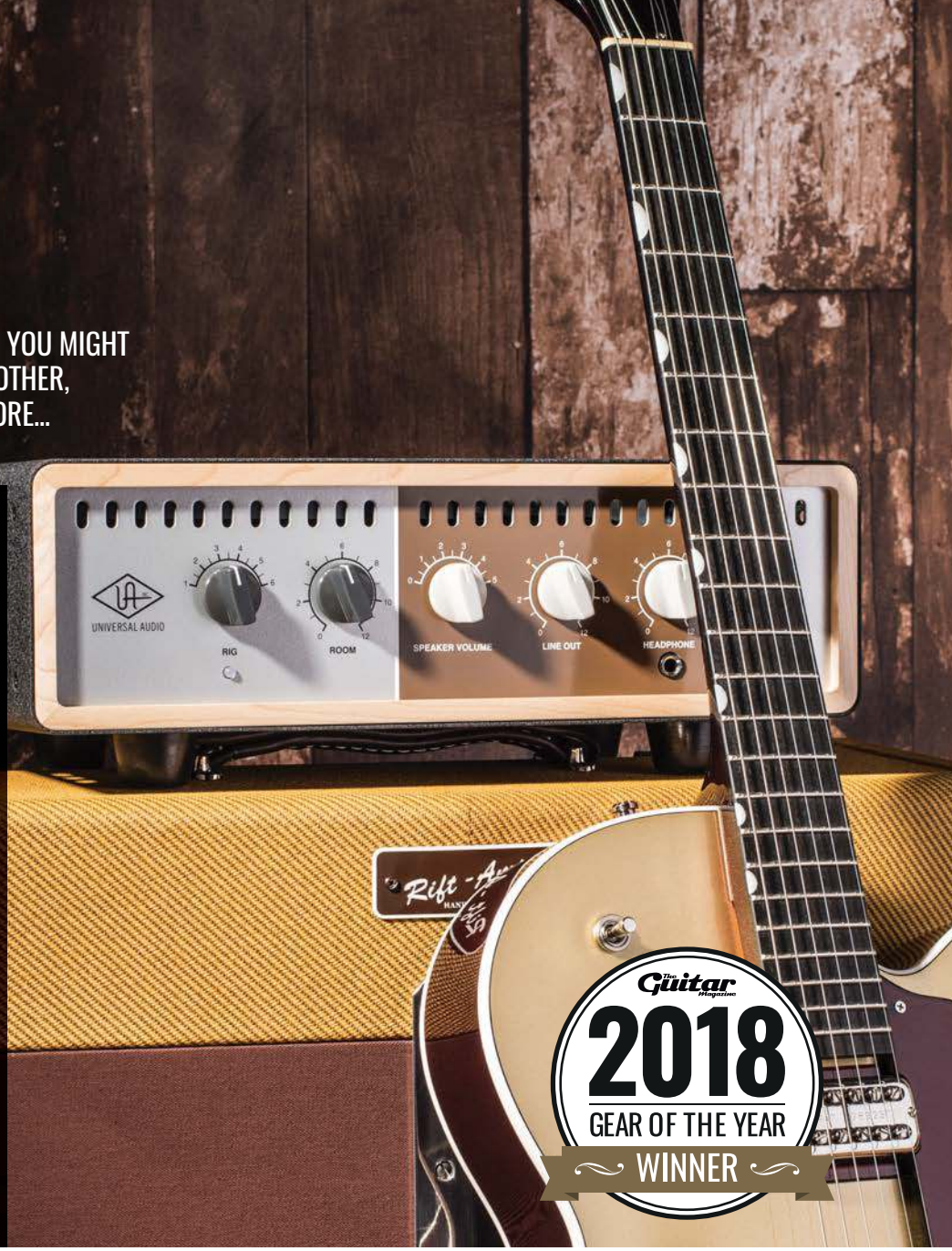
FROM STUDIO TOOLS TO ACTUAL TOOLS, YOU MIGHT NOT 'PLAY' THESE, BUT ONE WAY OR ANOTHER, THEY'LL ALL MAKE YOU PLAY GUITAR MORE...

UNIVERSAL AUDIO OX

- **PRICE** £1,170
- **REVIEWED** June 2018
- **VISIT uaudio.com**

It was telling that one of the hottest products at NAMM in January 2018 was on almost every stand at Summer NAMM in June. UA wasn't the first to combine attenuation, a reactive load and cabinet modelling, but there's something about the OX's elegant simplicity that makes guitar players feel at home in a way rackmounts rarely do. The OX allows you to continue to use your valve amp without compromising tone for the sake of volume, and solves a load of problems along the way. Game-changing.

WE SAID "For attenuation, sending the best sound to a PA desk, home practising with an inspiring tone and easy recording, the OX offers a one-stop solution that's hard to fault."



RECOMMENDED

TWO NOTES TORPEDO CAPTOR

- **PRICE** £199
- **REVIEWED** July 2018
- **VISIT two-notes.com**

WE SAID "Augmented with external processing and a bit of imagination, the Captor gets very close to the quality of some recently launched competitors, but for a lot less money."

HOUSE OF TONE TRU PAF HUMBUCKERS

- **PRICE** From £180 (set)
- **REVIEWED** February 2018
- **VISIT houseoftonepickups.com**

WE SAID "The Tru PAFs can be added to the (still) short list of PAF replicas that genuinely sound like the real deal."

MUSICNOMAD THE OCTOPUS

- **PRICE** £13.99
- **REVIEWED** December 2018
- **VISIT musicnomadcare.com**

WE SAID "An elegantly designed one-stop solution for the vast majority of routine guitar-maintenance tasks."

PINEGROVE LEATHER GS STRAPS

- **PRICE** From £55
- **REVIEWED** August 2018
- **VISIT pinegroveleather.com**

WE SAID "High-quality straps that blend hand-made feel and precision engineering, with some clever innovations thrown in."

EASTMAN

T64 Antique Goldburst Varnish

CHANGING THE CONVERSATION.

T64/v-GB

eastmanguitars.com

The Guitar Magazine 2018 GEAR OF THE YEAR WINNER

MID-PRICED ELECTRIC GUITARS

YOU CAN GET A LOT OF GUITAR FOR £1,000-£2,000 THESE DAYS, AND 2018 BROUGHT YOU MORE INSPIRATIONAL CHOICES THAN EVER BEFORE

EASTMAN SB59/V-GB

- **PRICE** £1,999
- **REVIEWED** June 2018
- **VISIT eastmanguitars.com**

We were hugely impressed when we first came across Eastman's SB59 single-cut back in 2017, but we always hoped that the company would find a way to combine its proprietary ageing techniques with a more conventional 'burst finish. The SB59/v-GB does that in style. The Antique Goldburst really does look like a weathered, slightly faded half-century-old sunburst that shows off the guitar's mesmerisingly flamed maple top. It wasn't just the finish that Eastman overhauled for 2018, however – the new custom-wound Lollar pickups give fabulously musical tones, while the neck carve is a wonderfully playable handful. And with Eastman's manufacture keeping the price under £2,000, there really is no reason not to try one.

WE SAID "Unapologetically vintage-inspired in style and sound, this beautiful single-cut is our favourite Eastman electric yet."

RECOMMENDED

FENDER
AMERICAN ORIGINAL '50S STRATOCASTER

- **PRICE** £1,609
- **REVIEWED** March 2018
- **VISIT fender.com**

WE SAID "Offering the flavour of an era along with a smoother playing experience, the American Original hits all the right notes for fans of Fender's greatest hits."

MAYBACH
ALBATROZ 65-2

- **PRICE** £1,614
- **REVIEWED** June 2018
- **VISIT maybach-guitars.de**

WE SAID "An SG tribute of the highest quality with a feature set that would command substantially more money from certain American manufacturers."

RIVOLTA
MONDATA STANDARD

- **PRICE** £1,187
- **REVIEWED** March 2018
- **VISIT rivoltaguitars.com**

WE SAID "A smart and versatile guitar that has the tonal chops to match its distinctive retro looks."

B&G GUITARS
LITTLE SISTER CROSSROADS MIDNIGHT OCEAN

- **PRICE** £1,550
- **REVIEWED** April 2018
- **VISIT bngguitars.com**

WE SAID "With easy playability afforded by the cutaway and remarkably good humbuckers, this is another hugely impressive B&G guitar."

MANSON GUITAR WORKS
MA-25 ANNIVERSARY EDITION

- **PRICE** £1,849
- **REVIEWED** February 2018
- **VISIT mansonguitarworks.com**

WE SAID "With a full-on voice to match its festive finish, this is a Manson worthy of marking any anniversary."

AFFORDABLE ELECTRIC GUITARS

WHETHER YOU'RE IN THE MARKET FOR YOUR FIRST SERIOUS GUITAR, OR A DEPENDABLE BACKUP, HERE ARE THE BEST SUB-£1,000 ELECTRICS FROM 2018...

FENDER PLAYER TELECASTER

- **PRICE** £549
- **REVIEWED** August 2018
- **VISIT fender.com**

For the longest time, Fender's Mexican-made Standard series was the default first 'proper' electric guitar for players of every stripe, so Fender needed to get things right when it replaced them with the totally overhauled Player Series this year. And did they ever. But in a range stacked with remarkably good instruments, the Player Tele stood tall. Keeping things classic on the looks front, the presence of six bent-steel saddles is a more player-friendly appointment, as is the smooth satin finish to the back of the neck. Plugging in, its vocal and expressive sounds instantly impress, delivering a range of classic Telecaster tones with pleasing jangle, snap and snarl. Whatever your tastes, this is an awful lot of Telecaster for your buck.

WE SAID "It's hard to argue with such a well-sorted and affordable take on Leo's firstborn."

The Guitar Magazine 2018 GEAR OF THE YEAR WINNER

RECOMMENDED

GRETSCH
G5420TG ELECTROMATIC 135TH ANNIVERSARY LTD

- **PRICE** £891
- **REVIEWED** June 2018
- **VISIT gretschguitars.com**

WE SAID "Classic Gretsch looks, vibe and most of the tone at a decent price, and with a few upgrades, this could become a pro-level guitar."

PRS
SE BERNIE MARSDEN SIGNATURE 2017 LTD

- **PRICE** £849
- **REVIEWED** February 2018
- **VISIT prsguitars.com**

WE SAID "PRS guitars are often celebrated for their consistency, but this model has plenty of vibe, too. A welcome return."

SHERGOLD
MASQUERADER SM04-SD

- **PRICE** £799
- **REVIEWED** March 2018
- **VISIT shergoldguitars.com**

WE SAID "With a lovely neck, a striking look and a brace of huge tones, this is a great addition to an impressive range."

JACKSON
X SERIES MARTY FRIEDMAN MF-1

- **PRICE** £519
- **REVIEWED** October 2018
- **VISIT jacksonguitars.com**

WE SAID "A solid and dependable sidearm that will suit players of metal, or any flavour of hard rock you can throw at it."

STERLING
AXIS AX3S

- **PRICE** £349
- **REVIEWED** December 2018
- **VISIT sterlingbymusicman.com**

WE SAID "A versatile selection of tones, a decent construction quality and a playable neck, all for a shade under £350. We're happy with that."

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EASTMAN E1D

- **PRICE** £499
- **REVIEWED** October 2018
- **VISIT eastmanguitars.eu**

There was a time when a sub-£500 acoustic guitar would be an unpleasant mix of cheap woods and slapdash build that often resulted in a poor-sounding and difficult-to-play mess. Brands such as Eastman have dramatically changed this perception, however, and the E1D is a remarkable testament to how good a guitar can play, sound and look at this price point nowadays. A powerhouse dreadnought in the most enjoyable way, there aren't many better ways you could spend £500.

WE SAID "The E1D is a stylish, uncomplicated, all-solid dreadnought that offers masses of projection and volume, and a familiar, likeable tone perfect for accompanying unamplified singers – all without breaking the bank."

RECOMMENDED

ALVAREZ AD60

- **PRICE** £299
- **REVIEWED** February 2018
- **VISIT alvarezguitars.com**

WE SAID "An extremely capable dreadnought, suitable for a wide range of musical styles, and it's outstanding value for money – go try one today, you won't be disappointed."

FAITH LEGACY NEPTUNE

- **PRICE** £1,299
- **REVIEWED** July 2018
- **VISIT faithguitars.com**

WE SAID "The Neptune is a mini-jumbo cutaway electro with sleek lines, excellent build quality, and bags of tone."

PRS SE T40E

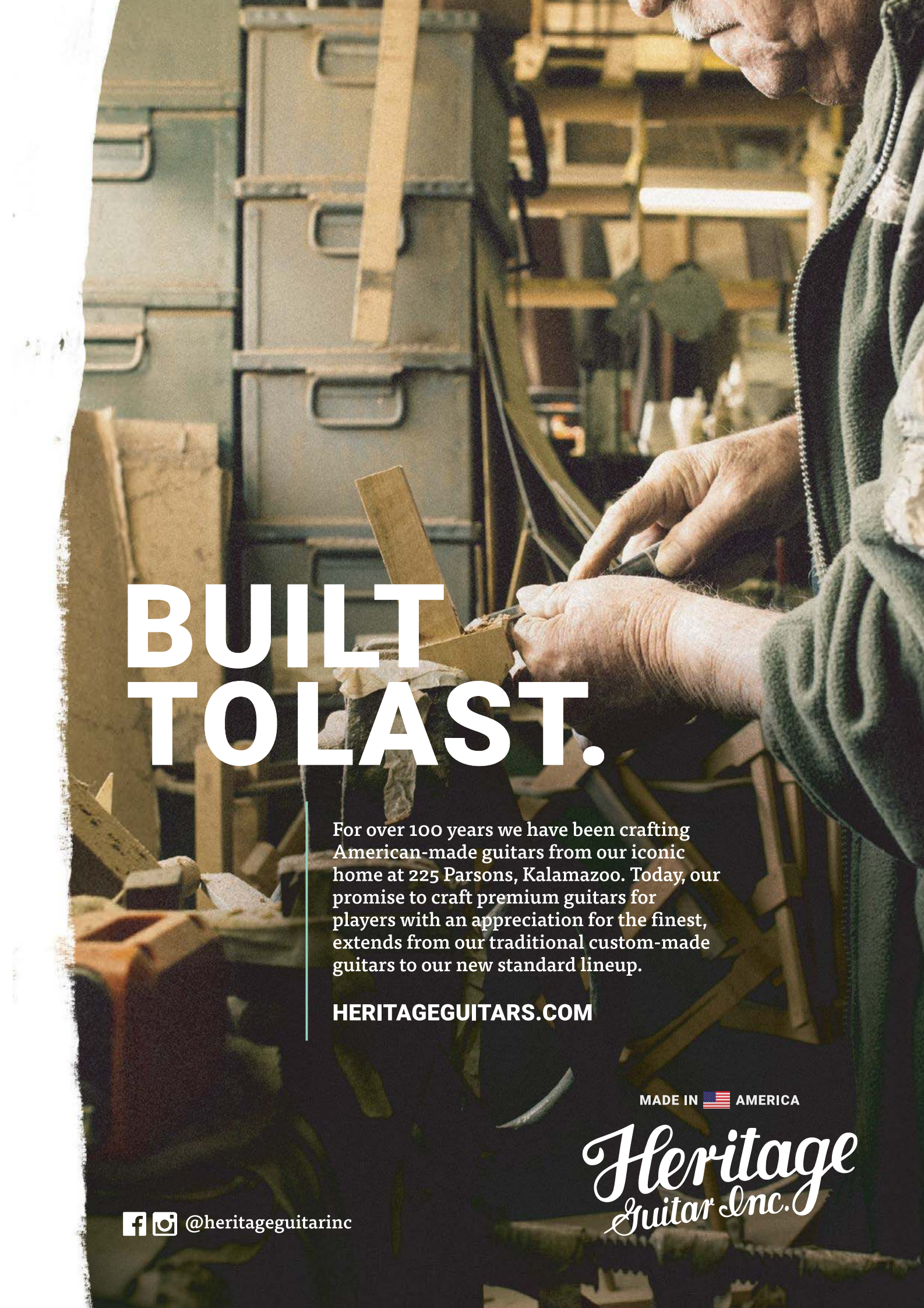
- **PRICE** £649
- **REVIEWED** July 2018
- **VISIT prsguitars.com**

WE SAID "The SE T40E is a good-looking, all-round-capable guitar suitable for a wide range of disciplines and venues."

ART & LUTHERIE LEGACY TENNESSEE RED

- **PRICE** £399
- **REVIEWED** February 2018
- **VISIT www.artandlutherieguitars.com**

WE SAID "The Legacy is a great-looking, comfortable to play guitar that's perfect for blues or ragtime, and represents excellent value for money."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The Guitar Magazine 2018 GEAR OF THE YEAR WINNER

MARSHALL ORIGIN 20C

- **PRICE** £559
- **REVIEWED** September 2018
- **VISIT marshall.com**

For many guitar players, 2019 was the year that Marshall finally got its mojo back. The Bletchley institution never stopped making great guitar amps, but for some time, it felt that there was a hole in the range for an affordable, gig-ready valve amp with vintage tones and stylings. The Origin 20C fills that void in some style. With 20 watts of valve-powered Marshall tones wrapped up in the company's iconic livery, the 20C also offers modern considerations, including an effects loop, power scaling down to 0.5 watts and a surprisingly usable DI out. One of the most important Marshall amps of recent times, this should be on every gigging guitarist's try list.

WE SAID "A smartly designed little combo that brings the Marshall roar in a versatile and affordable package."

RECOMMENDED

FENDER HOT ROD DELUXE IV

- **PRICE** £849
- **REVIEWED** March 2018
- **VISIT fender.com**

WE SAID "An effective update of the Hot Rod Deluxe, with smoother overdriven tones and improved reverb."

ORANGE ROCKER 15 TERROR

- **PRICE** £549
- **REVIEWED** April 2018
- **VISIT orangeamps.com**

WE SAID "Classic rock in a small box, with some added versatility for gigging and low-level practice."

BLACKSTAR 10TH ANNIVERSARY ARTISAN 10 AE

- **PRICE** £499
- **REVIEWED** May 2018
- **VISIT blackstaramps.com**

WE SAID "Boutique flavour at a bargain price; a fitting tribute to Blackstar's first 10 years."

DV MARK DV "RAW DAWG" EG

- **PRICE** £469
- **REVIEWED** February 2018
- **VISIT dvmark.it**

WE SAID "If you like your amps simple and prefer to get your overdrive from pedals, this ultra-portable and affordable head is a real winner."

AFFORDABLE EFFECTS PEDALS

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The Guitar Magazine 2018 GEAR OF THE YEAR WINNER

FENDER THE PELT FUZZ

- **PRICE** £85
- **REVIEWED** November 2018
- **VISIT fender.com**

Despite dominating the guitar world for decades, Fender never really nailed effects until 2018. The firm's new range of cleverly designed stompboxes is hugely impressive, but The Pelt is the cream of the crop – with an impressive range of fuzz tones on tap for under £100.

WE SAID "An affordable one-stop solution for a wide variety of vintage and contemporary fuzz sounds."

RECOMMENDED

KEELEY EL REY DORADO

- **PRICE** £149
- **REVIEWED** November 2018
- **VISIT robertkeeley.com**

WE SAID "A little box of fun that nails those classic cooking Marshall tones, the El Rey Dorado comes with two hot Plexi flavours for the price of one."

WAY HUGE RUSSIAN PICKLE MK III

- **PRICE** £152
- **REVIEWED** June 2018
- **VISIT wayhuge.com**

WE SAID "Fuzz that really does sound huge… but also sweet, clear and controlled."

ELECTRO-HARMONIX OP-AMP BIG MUFF PI

- **PRICE** £75
- **REVIEWED** November 2018
- **VISIT www.ehx.com**

WE SAID "A great-sounding fuzz that excels at more than just Seattle (or indeed Chicago) tone."

MXR SUGAR DRIVE

- **PRICE** £132
- **REVIEWED** July 2018
- **VISIT jimdunlop.com**

WE SAID "A suitably sweet low-gain overdrive that comes very close to the mythical Klon sound."

MONTY'S GUITARS MORE! BOOST

- **PRICE** £180
- **REVIEWED** August 2018
- **VISIT www.montysguitars.com**

WE SAID "A high-quality hand-made pedal, the More! is for those who are intent on unlocking inspiring new sounds from their existing effects chain."

FENDER MARINE LAYER REVERB

- **PRICE** £110
- **REVIEWED** May 2018
- **VISIT fender.com**

WE SAID "A classy-sounding reverb with a feature set that's been smartly chosen for maximum versatility."

WALRUS AUDIO EMISSARY BOOST

- **PRICE** £169
- **REVIEWED** October 2018
- **VISIT walrusaudio.com**

WE SAID "A more versatile tool than it first appears, and a potential secret weapon for your pedalboard."

CODAMUSIC www.coda-music.com

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BASS GEAR

FROM PORTABLE HEADS AND POWERFUL COMBOS, TO CLASSICS REBORN AND NEW BRANDS EXPLORED, IT'S BEEN ANOTHER GREAT YEAR FOR FOUR-STRING FUN...

ORANGE TERROR BASS

- **PRICE** £599
- **REVIEWED** November 2018
- **VISIT orangeamps.com**

Orange's Terror Bass was discontinued a couple of years ago, but in 2018, the Terror returned with a few important upgrades. The hybrid design now features a mini-toggle labelled 'clean' to deliver extra headroom and cleaner tones. It's a killer addition that adds extra versatility, allowing the Terror Bass to mix it up with the best small-format bass amps out there.

WE SAID "Offering a range of clean and raunchy bass tones that pack a punch, Orange's Terror Bass redux is ideal for the gigging circuit."

RECOMMENDED

FENDER AMERICAN ORIGINAL '50S PRECISION BASS

- **PRICE** £1,699
- **REVIEWED** June 2018
- **VISIT fender.com**

WE SAID "Arguably the best 'old style' Fender Precision available today, without entering Custom Shop territory."

AUDEN BOWMAN BASS

- **PRICE** £1,499
- **REVIEWED** May 2018
- **VISIT audenguitars.com**

WE SAID "Understated and beautifully proportioned, the Bowman may yet prove a future classic. An acquisition to treasure."

BLACKSTAR UNITY 250 BASS

- **PRICE** £499
- **REVIEWED** October 2018
- **VISIT blackstaramps.com**

WE SAID "This combo is plenty loud enough to handle most gigs, and won't let you down in the looks, build or tone departments, either."

FENDER PLAYER PRECISION BASS

- **PRICE** £659
- **REVIEWED** August 2018
- **VISIT fender.com**

WE SAID "A simple, easy-playing bass that's way more versatile than it looks."

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1956 Gibson ES-5N Switchmaster Blonde
1959 Gibson ES-355 Mono Stoptail
1960 Gibson ES-345 TDSV Cherry PAF's
1962 Gibson ES-335 TD PAF PAT
1964 Gibson ES-345 TDVC
1956 Gibson ES-175D
1959 Gibson ES-175D Players
1967 Gibson ES-330L Burgundy

1934 Gibson Super 400

1957 Fender Stratocaster Mary Kaye
1959 Fender Stratocaster maple neck
1961 Fender Stratocaster Blonde
1962 Fender Stratocaster Fiesta Red
1963 Fender Stratocaster Olympic White
1969 Fender Stratocaster S/B
1973 Fender Stratocaster LPB
1982 Fender Stratocaster AVRI

1952 Fender Telecaster ex-Lenny Kravitz
1953 Fender Telecaster
1956 Fender Telecaster
1958 Fender Telecaster Custom Prototype CATALOGUE guitar!
1967 Fender Custom Telecaster Candy Apple Red
1968 Fender Telecaster Thinline
1969 Fender Telecaster Sonic Blue

1959 Fender Jazzmaster Blonde
1963 Fender Jaguar Blonde Gold
1966 Fender Jaguar Olympic White

1952 Gibson Les Paul Goldtop
1955 Gibson Les Paul Goldtop
1968 Gibson Les Paul Goldtop
1958 Gibson Les Paul Custom
1960 Gibson Les Paul Custom
1974 Gibson Les Paul Custom
1955 Gibson Les Paul Junior
1959 Gibson Les Paul Junior 3/4
1960 Gibson Les Paul TV Junior
1956 Gibson Les Paul TV Special
1962 Gibson Les Paul SG STD Ebony Block
1963 Gibson Les Paul SG STD
1963 Gibson Korina Flying V White

1966 Fender Jazz Bass Sonic Blue MINT
1953 Fender Precision Bass
1980 Musicman Bass MINT!

1963 Gretsch Tennessean
1972 Dick Knight Custom Twin Neck ex Jon Camp Renaissance
1967 Rickenbacker 360/12 Gold Parts

1964 Epiphone FT110 Frontier
1968 Martin 00-18C

2005 PRS Employees Model Santana 2
2016 PRS DGT Private Stock
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2016 Gibson True Historic R9 Tom Murphy

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1956 Gibson Les Paul Standard MINT

1969 Gibson Flying V

1964 Fender Stratocaster Olympic White

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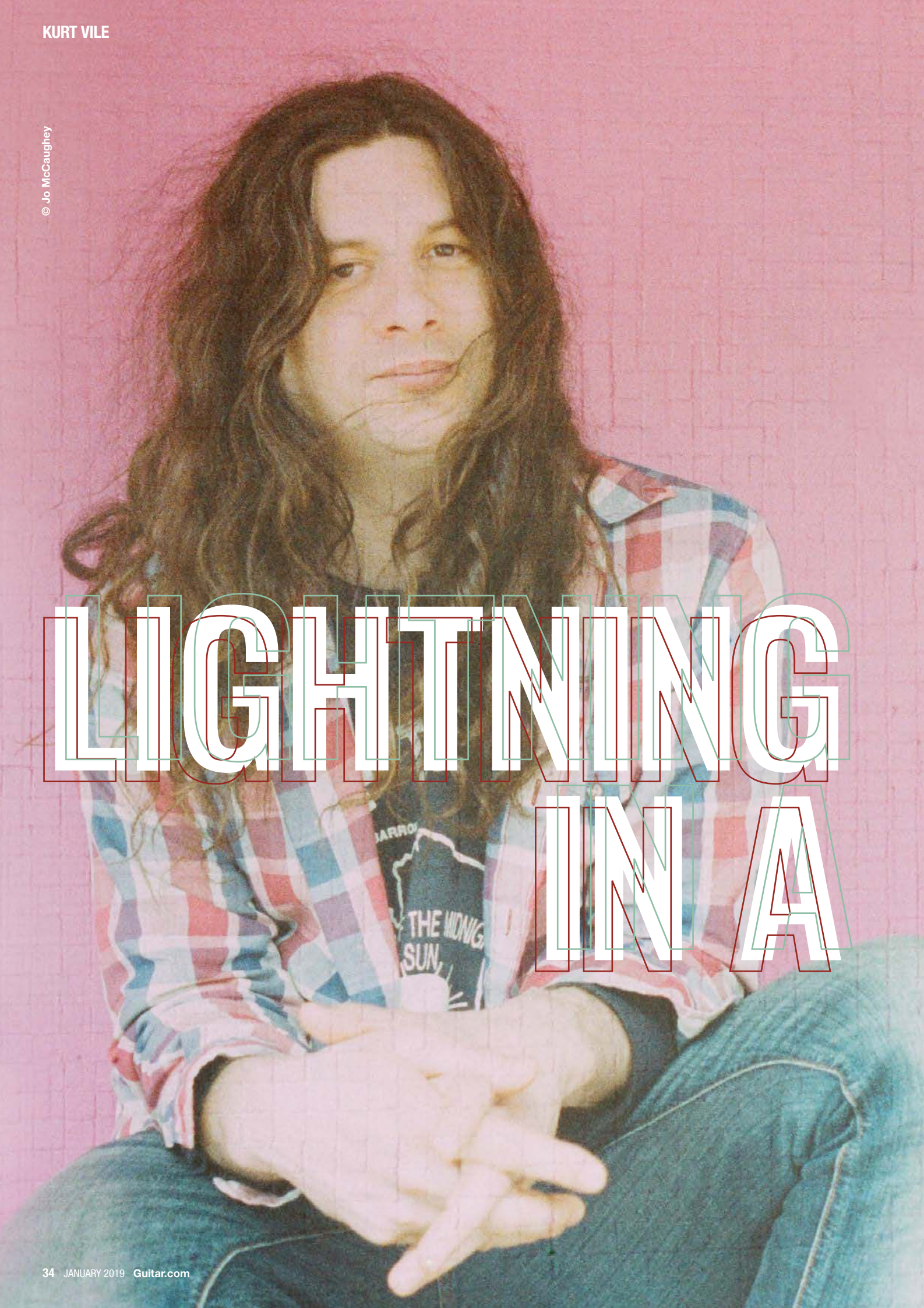

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LIGHTNING IN A

BOTTLE

Over the last five years, Kurt Vile has risen to the status of slacker-messiah to the US indie-rock scene: but he's also a phenomenal guitar player, a pin-sharp songwriter, and a Jaguar evangelist. Josh Gardner meets a laid-back Philadelphian with a competitive streak...

There's something a bit different about Kurt Vile. With his plaid shirt, skinny jeans and a grungey mop of hair that obscures large portions of his face, the gangly 38-year-old Philadelphian should blend seamlessly into the bar of this ultra-hip Shoreditch hotel. And he does... but at the same time, he stands out. But then perhaps we shouldn't be surprised at his ability to occupy two states at once – given that, over the last few years, Vile has managed the impressive feat of remaining an enigmatic outsider while still capturing the zeitgeist of contemporary alternative music.

He might not be topping the pop charts (though his signature tune, 2015's *Pretty Pimpin*, was a sizeable US radio hit), but make no mistake, Kurt Vile is popular with the *right* people. Neil Young has taken him on tour, as have Thurston Moore and J Mascis; he's played with John Cale and Cyndi Lauper, and released a critically acclaimed album, *Lotta Sea Lice*, with Courtney Barnett in 2017. He also straddles genres and generations – country megastar Keith Urban is a noted fan, as is Kiwi indie-pop sensation, Lorde. So if you're yet to catch up with him, what's all the fuss about?

In an era where image is everything and authenticity is a rare commodity, there's something attractively real about Kurt Vile's music. His songs are always personal yet intentionally vague, while musically, he cherry-picks from whatever has inspired him in that moment – from folk and country to grunge and hip-hop – and smashes it all together to create songs that sound both timeless and fresh, when both qualities are in short supply.

DRONING ON

Perhaps part of the reason Vile's music sounds so refreshing is his approach to the guitar, which was borne out of another instrument entirely.

"I always wanted a guitar most of all, but my dad got me a banjo when I was 14, and I used to play it like a guitar," Vile explains of his first steps into the guitar world. "My parents actually were going to get me a guitar for Christmas the year before, but I was really bad [laughs], so they ended up getting me a banjo for the next birthday! And then later, my neighbour would always hear me playing that banjo on our front porch, and they actually gave me an acoustic guitar."

Trying to play guitar on a banjo isn't the most conventional way to learn the instrument, but on reflection, Kurt can see the impact it had on the development of his droning, fingerpicked six-string style.

"It definitely informed it a little subliminally, for sure," he agrees. "Because banjos are in an open tuning, and they've got that high drone string. It's not like you'd even think about that when you're playing as a kid, but I came to really like that ethereal drone.

"You end up dissecting these things later in life, and then you realise! I took some basic banjo lessons when I was a kid, and he taught me just the chords to songs, but still, the fact that it was all in open G... both literally, and figuratively in your mind, it makes things more open. Whereas if I'd taken guitar lessons where they

© Getty Images

Kurt plays a sunburst Jaguar with The Violators in 2016, in Austin, Texas

teach you barre chords and all that... it puts you in a box, you'd have bars around you, barre chords!"

INDEPENDENT SPIRIT

Kurt began writing songs almost as soon as he picked up that banjo – inspired in part by the serendipitous emergence of "weird" alternative rock in the 90s, such as Beck, Pavement and Ween at that time – and before long, he was picking up electric guitars and searching for interesting gear and interesting sounds.

"You don't really know anything about gear in your teens, but I think when I was about 17 or 18, I got a Les Paul, but it was called The Paul," Vile recalls. "It was like, walnut? I still have it, in fact, and I used it on my early recordings. If you listen to my *The Hunchback* EP, that was the quintessential The Paul sound! It's The Paul going through one of those very awesome purple Line 6 filter pedals [the FM4 Filter Modeler – Ed] through a Fender Champ. That was a very cool sound!"

Around this time, Kurt started recording his music, and his early experiences instilled a DIY ethos that still fuels him today.

"That's been there from the start," he affirms. "I had a friend, and his older brothers recorded me because they were recording his band, so right away, without knowing, the home-recording DIY thing was always around for me. I would record myself on a shitty tape recorder, and then CD-Rs came along and I was putting out CD-Rs! It wasn't until I was 28 years old that somebody finally put something out of mine for real, but I was putting out plenty of my own CD-Rs until then!"

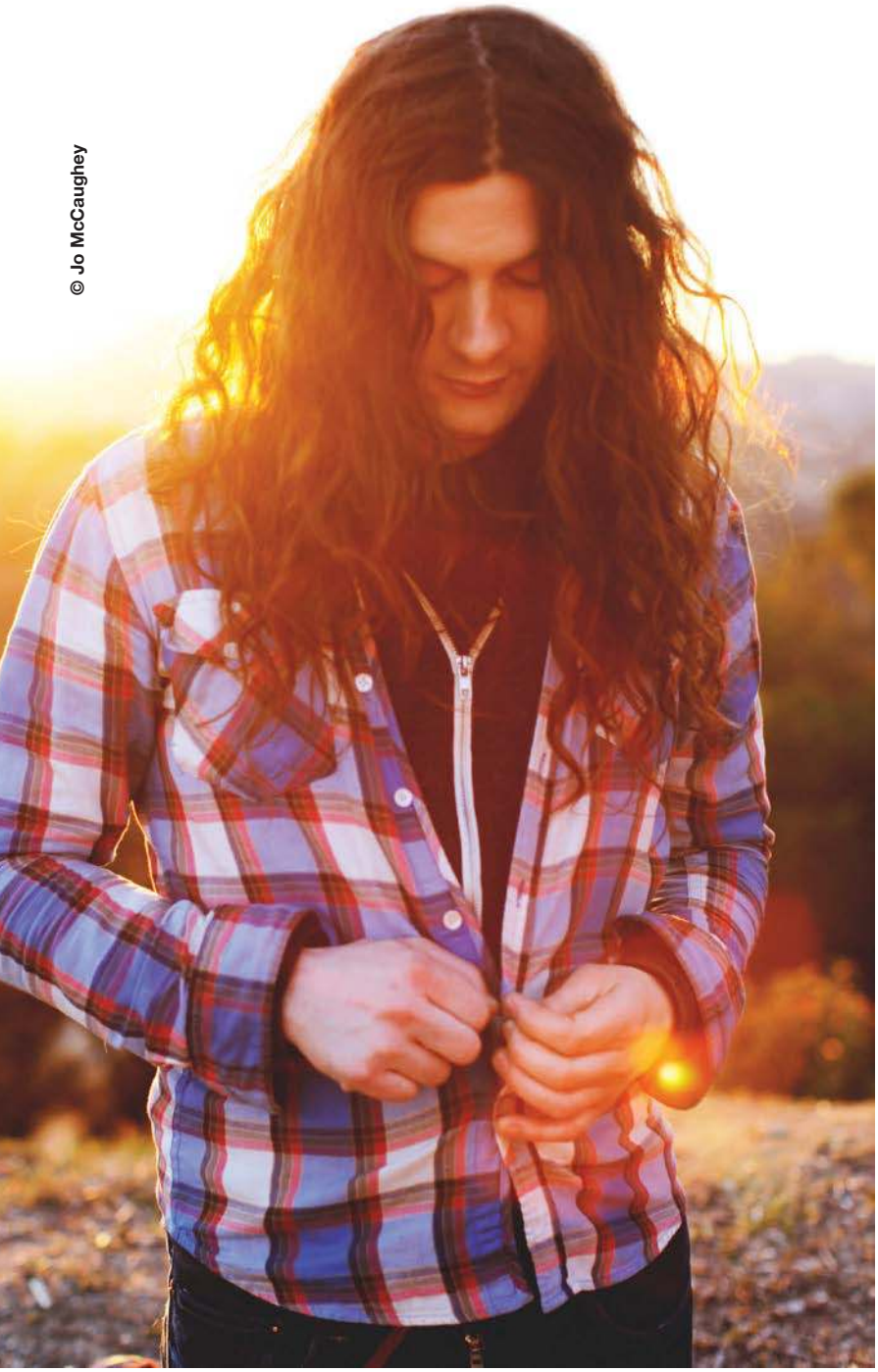
> "RIGHT AWAY, WITHOUT KNOWING, THE HOME-RECORDING DIY THING WAS ALWAYS AROUND FOR ME"

Having such a long period paying his dues definitely gives Kurt an appreciation of where he is today, now signed to international indie label Matador.

"Yeah, I feel lucky, because from 17 to 27, that's 10 years when it was just this homespun thing," he reflects. "Then from 28 to now at 38, that's another 10 years – and that's been the era of labels actually putting me out. But I'm still doing things my own way."

GRAND DESIGNS

In the early 2000s, Vile left his native Philadelphia and moved to Boston, where he worked as a forklift driver while spending his downtime making music and experimenting with his sound. "I had an eight-track and I had a job, so I could buy all these pedals and all these synths," he explains. "I was getting pretty



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"I HAVE A WHOLE ALBUM'S WORTH OF MATERIAL THAT DIDN'T EVEN MAKE THE RECORD"

psychedelic there… so I had to do something and make some new friends!"

His solution was to head back home, where his paths crossed with another hotshot guitar player, Adam Granduciel – better known as the bandleader of The War On Drugs – and the two really hit it off.

"I met Adam in 2003 and we started playing together until about 2005, but just casually," Kurt recalls. "But then 2005 to 2007 was a real renaissance, and we really connected. He recorded on a tonne of my stuff, my Kurt Vile & The Violators stuff, and I'd been playing in The War On Drugs casually, but then that became more serious, too."

It ended up with the curious situation that both were effectively filling the role of lead guitarist in the other's band, but despite their partnership yielding mutually beneficial results, the two friends remained fully committed to being the captains of their respective ships first and foremost, and they even became a little competitive with it…

"I was always happy to be involved with him, but then once he got a record deal with Secretly Canadian… 'cause I'm an ambitious person, I was mentally out of the band. I was like: 'Hey, fuck this!'" Vile laughs.

Despite his obvious desire to do his own thing, however, Vile instantly dismisses the notion that the pair went their separate ways anything other than amicably.

"I still went on tour with The War On Drugs and I was lucky enough to have him come and play on my first Matador record, which I started recording before The War On Drugs, but it came out after," he explains. "And then with *Smoke Ring For My Halo* [Vile's breakout 2011 LP], I was lucky to have him continue to play in The Violators [Kurt's backing band] – he actually played longer with us than I did with him! And I really love his *Slave Ambient* record. I guested on that, but that's when he became *really* busy with The War On Drugs. He hasn't played in The Violators since – and now he's definitely too busy!"

PIMPIN' AIN'T EASY

In 2015, Vile released his sixth studio album, *B'lieve I'm Goin Down*, and with it came his first real taste of mainstream crossover. "In a way, that was me trying to get back to my roots, in that I didn't have a producer in the beginning," he reflects. "But it had *Pretty Pimpin*, which I guess became my biggest radio hit."

If there's one song that has cemented Vile's place in the indie-rock mainstream, it's that one – four minutes and 59 seconds of hypnotically looping, relentlessly catchy fingerpicked guitar, paired with sublimely odd stream-of-consciousness lyrics. It topped the Billboard Adult Alternative Songs charts in 2016.

"I knew it was a catchy riff, the fingerpicking riff," Vile reflects of how that song came together. "But I had the right people playing with me – Stella Mozgawa from Warpaint on drums was unreal. The band was heavily involved in that record for sure. There was a lot of times where it was just me and my bandmate Rob Laakso, we put our heads together, and here we are."

HITTING THE BOTTLE

Since *B'lieve I'm Goin Down*, Vile has enjoyed further chart success with *Lotta Sea Lice*, his album with Courtney Barnett, but now he's back with his first proper solo effort since, *Bottle It In*. It's Vile's most diverse and interesting album to date, no doubt impacted by the album's long gestation – its recording was fitted in and around his varied other projects.

"It was a long process," he affirms. "But in another sense, the recording was pretty fast. Because I'd record here and then go and do something else, then go and record somewhere else and do something else. I have a whole album's worth of material that didn't even make the record. It's just my way of life – recording when I can and then figuring out what the record is going to be later."

It's also an album jam-packed with freewheeling and interesting guitar work, born of an improvisational approach to recording.

"I try to sing and play live, or at least have an instrument there in case I feel the need to play, and in the song *Skinny Mini* I did *not* know I was going to rip a couple of insane solos!" he chuckles. "It was so loud! We borrowed this 1950s Bassman. The guy we borrowed

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it from was like: 'Be careful, those are the original speakers!' – and we just cranked it! I had this song with these lyrics, but I didn't know it was going to be so long, and I didn't know I was going to crank this solo in the middle of it... and then I certainly didn't know I was going to come back and do it again! But the tremolo bar thing just felt good."

Indeed, when he reflects on his favourite guitar moments on *Bottle It In*, it seems like the ones that took him by surprise came out best.

"I like a lot of the solos in *Hysteria* – I didn't know I'd be ripping solos in that, either!" he laughs. "I never know – it's not planned! The guitar synth in *Loading Zones*... I didn't know that was going to happen, either! I just knew I wanted to try it, so I tried it on that."

BIG CATS

Electrics-wise, Kurt's weapon of choice has long been a vintage Fender Jaguar – an instrument he's so associated with, he was asked to be the face of Fender's American Original Jaguar campaign, when it was launched earlier this year.

"I like Fender Jaguars and I like filter pedals," he succinctly sums up. "It takes a while to make 'em work! I use a Mastery bridge on them, and I try to get the pre-CBS ones, because they're made really well – but I've had lots of others that are, too. They look cool. That's really important! There's this band that my bandmate Rob grew up listening to, and ended up being in, called Swirlies. They were like an American My Bloody Valentine, but more raw and with cool synths. They used the Jaguar in a way that was close to My Bloody Valentine, but it was a little more American – a bit more garage-y, more raw. And it kinda comes from that, y'know?

"I prefer vintage gear, but I do like some of the new stuff that's coming out. Fender has promised me some guitars! They're going to make me a custom Jag, and they're supposed to give me one of the George Harrison Rosewood [Telecasters]... both were promised to me, but I guess I should get back in touch and see what's up!"

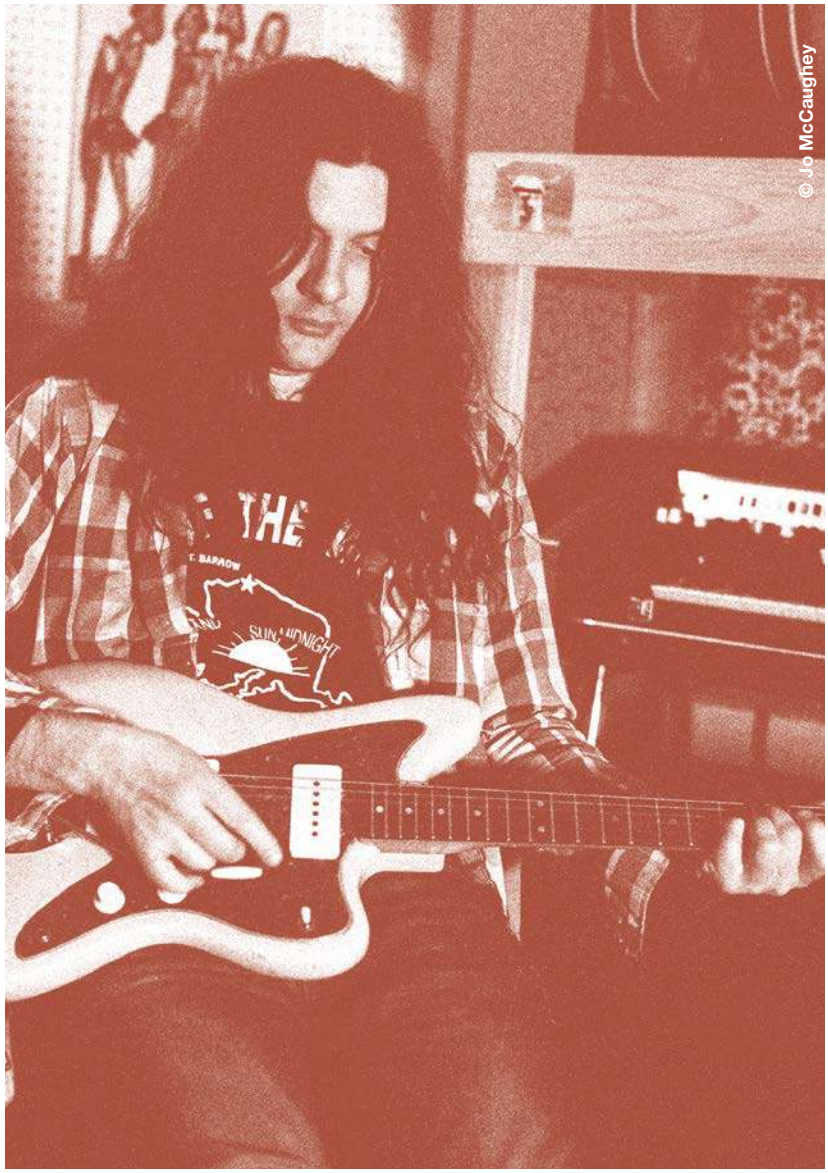
When it comes to amplifiers and effects, Kurt is leaning towards the smaller and more minimal end of the scale.

"Towards the end of the record, Fender sent me one of those '57 Champ reissues, and that was really cool," he recalls. "I love the fact that it's so small and you can just turn it up – and I've since bought an actual 1950s version. I borrowed my bandmate Jesse's Moog MIDI MuRF and used it on that song, *Yeah Bones*. I like Minifoogers – I use a bunch of those. I love filters of various kinds..."

GIVING IT AIR

While he loves his electric, Vile is also a fabulous acoustic player, who leans on a pair of lesser-seen Martin Philadelphia Folk Festival models for the bulk of his acoustic work. "They sound absolutely amazing, they sound old, but they're pretty new," he enthuses.

"I have a couple of Baxendale acoustic guitars. That company, they refurbish old Harmonys and Kayes and make them more solid. I also really like those old Fender Palomino acoustic guitars – they're kinda cheap, but kinda awesome! I've got so many acoustics, I've got this black Waterloo acoustic... that thing is amazing. I played it on *Bassackwards*. Part of me wants to take them on the road, but whenever I take a really good acoustic on the road, it never sounds the same afterwards.



© Jo McCaughey

"SOMETIMES WITH AN ELECTRIC, I'LL BUY IT AND IT FEELS SO GOOD IT'LL BE WEEKS BEFORE I EVEN PLUG IT IN"

"I'm not too precious about gear, plus I like the way guitars look when they're beat up, but there's certain ones that I just have to draw the line with."

As such an accomplished player on either electric or acoustic, we round off our chat by asking which he prefers, and he pauses to consider for a moment. "I'm both, but if I had to pick one, I would say acoustic," he finally answers. "Because that's where I can just sit down on my couch and write a tune. What's better than picking something up and playing it without having to plug it in or anything?

"And electrics don't always have to be electrified, either. Sometimes with an electric guitar, I'll buy it and it feels so good that it'll be weeks before I even plug it in. I just love the way it sounds acoustically so much, sometimes it's almost startling to plug it in. Like: 'Oh fuck, it sounds weird! It sounded so good unplugged!'"

Kurt Vile's latest LP, *Bottle It In*, is out now on Matador Records

Bernie Marsden's new book, *Tales Of Tone And Volume*, is a lovingly curated exploration of his favourite gear

TREASURE TROVE

Documenting the remarkable collection of Whitesnake legend Bernie Marsden and featuring 1,000 images across nearly 400 pages, *Tales Of Tone And Volume* is not your average guitar book. Here, Bernie gives us the inside track on a project that has been over two years in the making...

Story **Chris Vinnicombe**
Portrait **Fabio Gianardi** Guitar Photography **Melvyn May**

"There have always been a lot of good ones, but I think I can say there's never been a book like this. And I've got a lot of them." Bernie Marsden is in characteristically good humour when we catch up with him ahead of the launch of *Tales Of Tone And Volume*, a luxury tome that catalogues the lion's share of one of the world's finest guitar collections and tells the story of the instruments inside along the way.

Photographed over a two-year period by Melvyn May and the Rufus Publications team, the book documents the blues-rocker's guitars in almost forensic detail. "The working title of the book, before I came up with *Tales...*, was *Dust And Scratches*," Bernie reveals. "That lasted for quite a long time. Whether people like it or not, I very rarely clean my guitars, you see. So consequently, they're just covered in either gig sweat and horrible stuff like that, or dust.

"But I'm looking through the proofs now, and I'm seeing stuff on guitars I've had for 25 years that I've never seen before. Lots of the pictures are almost from an engineer's point of view. Especially the bridges and the tailpieces and stuff like that from the early days in the 50s... it's incredible, the ingenuity, to make this stuff work, on top of fabulous wood. It really is a joy."

INSIDE THE VAULT

Bernie has made sure that the book features the majority of the precious hardware residing in his lock-up. "I probably left out, I dunno, 20 per cent of them," he says. "I wanted to include the guitars that I've used and that people will have seen over the years. Stuff that's interesting. There's also stuff in there that I've only owned for a couple of years – because I've always wanted one and was in a position to pick one up. I've obviously got a load of PRS guitars, but how many PRSes of the same type can you put in, page after page after page? So I've been relatively frugal with that kind of thing.

"But there's also a £120 Squier Strat next to a £40,000 ES-335... and it's all very anecdotal. So I'll tell you why I used it on a certain track or where it came from, how I lost it and how I got it back. I think people will enjoy the read... it's not just pictures. I've also had

Bernie's 1952 Goldtop, signed by Les Paul himself – but not in the conventional manner, as you'll see over the page

people asking if there are any lessons in there? No, it's not that kind of book!"

Aside from the more philosophical lessons about the ones that got away, that is: "For every one guitar that I kept from all the touring in the 70s and 80s and 90s, I used to bring two back from America. I'd sell two at a profit to pay for the third one! So if I've got one Firebird, I probably had three and sold two... If I'd have had the money to keep everything I bought in those days, I'd have many, many more guitars! But I'm not bothered about that. That's all part of the story."

LOVE STORY

Bernie's 1959 Les Paul Standard, aka The Beast, is one of the most famous Bursts of them all, and needless to say, the shots of the guitar in various states of undress are one of the highlights of the book. During the course of our interview we discover that, ironically enough, Bernie's love affair with Les Pauls was in part the result of the band Love Affair, best known for topping the charts in 1968 with their version of *Everlasting Love*.

"The guy in Love Affair had a Les Paul and it always looked great on TV," Bernie recalls. "I remember thinking, 'I really want one of those.' So even though it would be the

“IF YOU SEE ONE OF THESE SIGNED WITH A NAIL, THE CHANCES ARE, IT’S GENUINE”

Claptons and Mick Taylors who really made me want one, sound-wise, seeing Rex Brayley with Love Affair... he looked really cool. Nobody knew much about Les Pauls back then, but I thought it looked good!

“And then, of course, there was Peter Green and I thought, ‘Oh, he uses one as well.’ And suddenly it was like, that’s the guitar to have. And I was kind of aware of Mike Bloomfield as well. And of course Keith Richards had the one we would have all seen on TV. But I didn’t get one until I’d turned pro. If I’d been clever enough, like Paul Kossoff was, to go out and buy one when he was 15... but I can’t complain, because the one I bought was relatively inexpensive! I’ve made a profit, I think [laughs].”

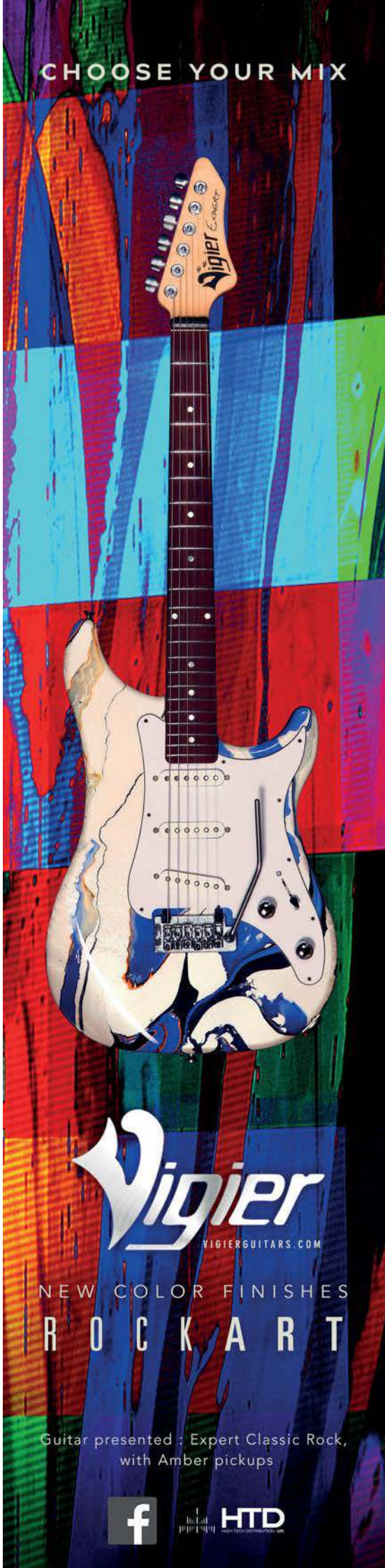
NAILING IT

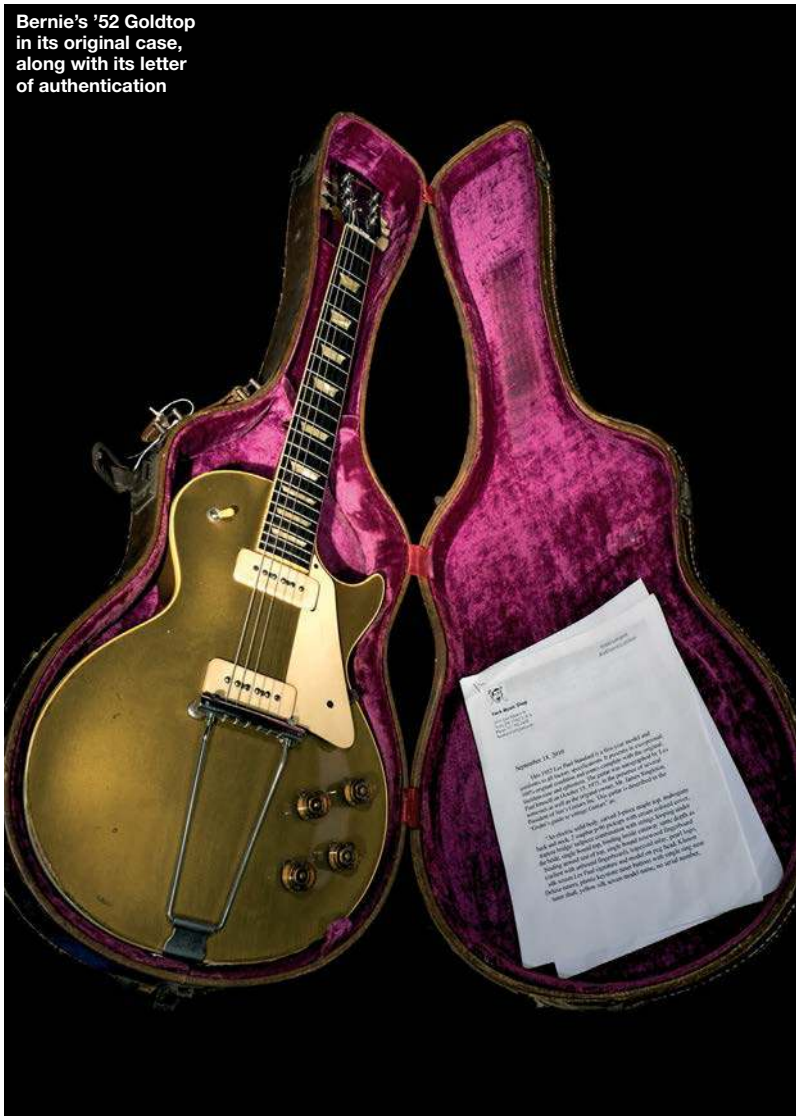
The guitar that graces these pages is another, earlier, Gibson Les Paul from Bernie’s collection. The guitarist takes up the story:

“I got it from a guy called Jim Singleton, who’s a guitar dealer in the States. He was with Danny Gatton. And Les Paul was in the venue they were in at the time. They showed it to Les, because it’s a very early ’52 model in really good condition. It isn’t the very first batch, because the very first batch had the pickups with diagonal screws and no neck binding. But this one’s pretty close.”

Les promptly played the guitar, got a kick out of it and was asked to sign it. “He said yeah,” recounts Bernie. “And he put his hand in his pocket and pulled out a small nail, and scratched it into the scratchplate. He said to them: ‘If you see one of these signed with a nail, the chances are, it’s genuine. If you see one signed with a pen, the chances are I didn’t do it!’

“Jim said Danny Gatton was losing his mind when Les Paul was signing a Les Paul with a nail! ‘With a nail, man!’ He kept one in his pocket, apparently, for such events.”





Bernie's '52 Goldtop in its original case, along with its letter of authentication

"WHEN YOU OVERLOAD IT, IT'S JUST A FANTASTIC SOUND. I HAD A BALL USING IT"

Although an original '52 Les Paul Goldtop signed by the man himself is a valuable artefact, that doesn't stop Bernie using one for the purposes it was originally intended.

"The tailpiece is a pain, but if you just learn to deal with it for an hour, you kind of get used to it," he explains. "It sounds amazing, I have to say. You can see every reason why all of those blues guys would have picked one up. Nothing sounded like 'em. It's got that rasp about it. It's on the CD that comes with the book. You can hear it on the track called *Lester* [laughs].

"I really enjoy playing it. It's an easy guitar to play, really. Especially when you overload it, and push it, and wind it up a bit. It's just a fantastic sound. I just had a ball using it. I know some companies make a gizmo to get away from the tailpiece but honestly, just play the bloody thing! Don't worry about the bridge, that's how it was made. It does hamper you a little bit, but you just get used to it. I sometimes wonder if I took that off, would it sound the same?"

From double-necks to gorgeous acoustics, high-end replicas and bargain-basement rarities, Bernie speaks just as fondly of some of his cheaper, more recent finds as he does the golden-era antiquities. And of course, 1950s Gibsons were relatively new instruments when they were used to make some of the most cherished recordings in rock history. "When I got The Beast, that was '74. It was 15 years old... What is vintage? I don't get too involved in the originality stuff, but I do like playing them and they do sound great. There's nothing like a late-50s ES-335 if you are plugged into a small amp at a blues gig. There's nothing like it. And I'm sure the new ones are good. But are you going to pay £3,000 for one, or £35,000 for one? Really, you've got to cut the cloth to make it fit, haven't you?

"It's funny though, when you see them all together, page after page after page, you think, 'Why did you do this? Was it almost some kind of madness?' But as you well know, I'm not unique. Guitar players do have lots of guitars..." Ain't that the truth.

BOOK MATCHING

Tales Of Tone And Volume is available to order now and comes in three editions. *The Standard Edition* (£95 plus delivery) is an A4-sized coffee-table book in a cardboard slipcase that comes with a CD of original music recorded by Bernie especially for this project.

The Guitarist's Edition (£350 plus delivery) ups the size to A3 and is quarterbound in leather with an embossed clamshell case. This is limited to 300 signed and numbered copies worldwide and ships with the CD, exclusive art prints and a piece of a 1950s Lifton guitar case from Bernie's collection. Finally, the mighty *The Beast Edition* (£495) is limited to 100 copies and quarterbound in leather with a luxurious wooden case embossed with The Beast logo. *The Beast Edition* also ships with the CD, framed art prints of The Beast and a real piece of 1950s Lifton case. Visit rufuspublications.com to order your copy.

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SECRET VALENTINE

As a sideman, versatile guitarist Val McCallum has the dream gig – he tours the world playing the Jackson Browne songbook. As a sessioneer, he's laid down tracks for a roll call of A-list stars, and as a solo artist, he's written critically acclaimed love songs. But as Bob Hewitt finds out, being raised by stars of the screen could've led him on a very different path...

As the son of TV and film stars David '*Man From U.N.C.L.E.*' McCallum and actress Jill Ireland, you might be forgiven for thinking Valentine McCallum would follow in their acting and movie-making footsteps. This would seem an even more likely destiny for Val when you consider his parents divorced when he was only two years old and he was raised by his mother and stepdad – who just happened to be *The Magnificent Seven* and *Death Wish* film star Charles Bronson.

However, both Jill and Charlie (as Val refers to him) were huge music fans, so Val grew up listening to an eclectic selection. He recalls driving around Hollywood with his mother in her '67 Corvette Stingray convertible, both of them singing in harmony to the hits of the day by Elton John, Harry Nilsson and The Rolling Stones. Charlie had more conservative taste, so McCallum junior didn't really appreciate Mr Bronson's Frank Sinatra record collection until much later on.

There may have been many career options ahead of him, but thanks to his family's love of music, McCallum set off on a trajectory that would culminate in being the guitarist of choice for one of the world's finest singer-songwriters – Jackson Browne. He's currently working on a new solo album, his second, as well as Jackson's forthcoming record, and has produced the well-received *American Story* for Nashville-based singer-songwriter Brooks Hubbard.

From his childhood beginnings with a Giannini nylon-string guitar, to co-writing the critically acclaimed *Tokyo Girl* (a beautiful love song inspired by Val's wife, Shelli) with Dillon O'Brien, the Telecaster-wielding McCallum has also graced the stage and studio with the likes of Sheryl Crow, Willie Nelson, Shelby Lynne, Harry Nilsson, Vonda Shepard, Lucinda Williams, Randy Newman – and the late Johnny Hallyday.

MUSICAL YOUTH

By the age of seven, Val was already learning guitar, thanks mainly to the encouragement and ability of his older brother Paul, and his mother's insistence on them taking lessons at Fred Walecki's famous Westwood

© Bob Hewitt

"MY GRANDFATHER PLAYED ON THE BEATLES' A DAY IN THE LIFE. HE'S ALSO CREDITED BY JIMMY PAGE FOR SUGGESTING USING A VIOLIN BOW ON HIS GUITAR"

Previous page **Val McCallum with a 1953 Fender Esquire**

Above, left to right **Val's favourite Tele – a 'partscaster' made from a 1961 Fender neck and a bound body Val found in the spares bin at Chicago Music Exchange, subsequently signed by Willie Nelson; one of his Danocasters; a 1960s Danelectro six-string bass and a 1957 blonde Fender Esquire with retrofitted neck pickup, tuned a whole step down and strung with flatwound gauge 0.012s**

Opposite page **McCallum with pedal-steel player Greg Leisz**

Music store. Westwood was only a two-mile hop from the family home, so Val would jump on his skateboard and hang out on the couch. Joe Walsh and Larry Carlton were regulars at the shop and Fred would say: "Hey guys – you've got to listen to Val."

Val takes up the story: "I was 13 years old – and I would play my 'chop', as I like to refer to it! Larry Carlton was one of my first guitar heroes, and I used to often see him play at The Baked Potato in Studio City," he says.

Born and raised in Los Angeles, but with Scottish and English heritage, Val traces his family's musical history back to his grandfather, David McCallum senior. He was a professional violinist from Glasgow, and concert master of the Royal Philharmonic Orchestra. Val recalls: "My grandfather actually played on The Beatles' track *A Day In The Life*. He's also credited by Jimmy Page for suggesting using a violin bow on the strings of his electric guitar.

"My mum was musical, too – she played a little bit of guitar, and would have lessons with me at Fred Walecki's store... she really loved to sing, as well. I didn't really continue with guitar lessons, though – once I'd learned a few chords, it was a case of getting in front of the record player and moving that needle back in the grooves, over and over," he laughs.

Jill really wanted Val to knuckle down, and she begged him to learn music theory. She even offered to buy him a car if he would, but the petulant teenager just didn't want to exercise that side of his brain. He says: "I was playing guitar from such a young age. It was Chuck Berry at first, like 90 per cent of guitar players. My brother showed me how to play *Johnny B. Goode* and I was off... never wanted to do anything else."

LISTEN AND LEARN

Val recalls his influences in those formative years. "From then on, it was all Keith Richards, because he is the greatest riff-writer of all time. Then Jimi Hendrix – but that was harder to learn, because Jimi had all these subtleties in his playing and they weren't easy for a youngster to capture," he says.

Thinking back, Val tells us: "The neat thing about playing guitar is you're constantly learning. I still listen to all my original influences – and I would cite Mick Taylor as well, because I love The Stones."

So aside from Jeff Beck (see boxout), what were the other influences steering Val? "When I was a teenager, there was nothing but good music on Top 40 radio – it seemed every other song had a great guitar solo in it," he tells us. "You'd hear Amos Garrett's amazing solo from *Midnight At The Oasis*, then straight into The Eagles'

One Of These Nights – with Don Felder's perfect lead playing... then Jesse Ed Davis blowing all over [Jackson Browne's] *Doctor My Eyes*. The 70s was a great time to be learning guitar," says McCallum.

BROWNE SOUND

Val linked up with Jackson Browne following a spell as guitar player for Vonda Shepard's band. Vonda was one of Jackson's backing singers – but also performed the music for the *Ally McBeal* TV show in the 1990s and 2000s. Val takes up the story: "That show ran for about seven years, but when it ended, I realised I had to find some work. Thankfully, Jackson called about a week later. He was working on his *The Naked Ride Home* record, and asked if I would play on a couple of tracks." McCallum goes on to say: "I guess it was a kind of audition, and I ended up playing on the title track. It was a really good session. That resulted in Jackson asking if I wanted to join the band and go on the road with him."

McCallum toured the world with Jackson Browne – playing second guitar to Mark Goldenberg. He enjoyed it immensely, but decided against doing the follow-up tour. "I bowed out for awhile, and decided to put together my own group, comically named Jackshit," he says. "Jackson and I remained friends, and indeed, he plays with my band whenever he's in town... he's known as Browne Shit!"

McCallum's band is based on three fictitious characters from Cochtotan, south of Bakersfield. Apart from Jackson, Elvis Costello and Richard Thompson (affectionately referred to as Richard The Turd) regularly guest, joining in the laughter and great music.

McCallum's link to Browne was reinstated on a regular basis about seven years ago. He tells us: "I'd made my solo album *At The End Of The Day*, and Jackson loved it. He sang on it, too. Jackson asked me if I'd go back on the road with him and sing one of my songs nightly." This was Val's opportunity to perform *Tokyo Girl* mid-show, every evening.

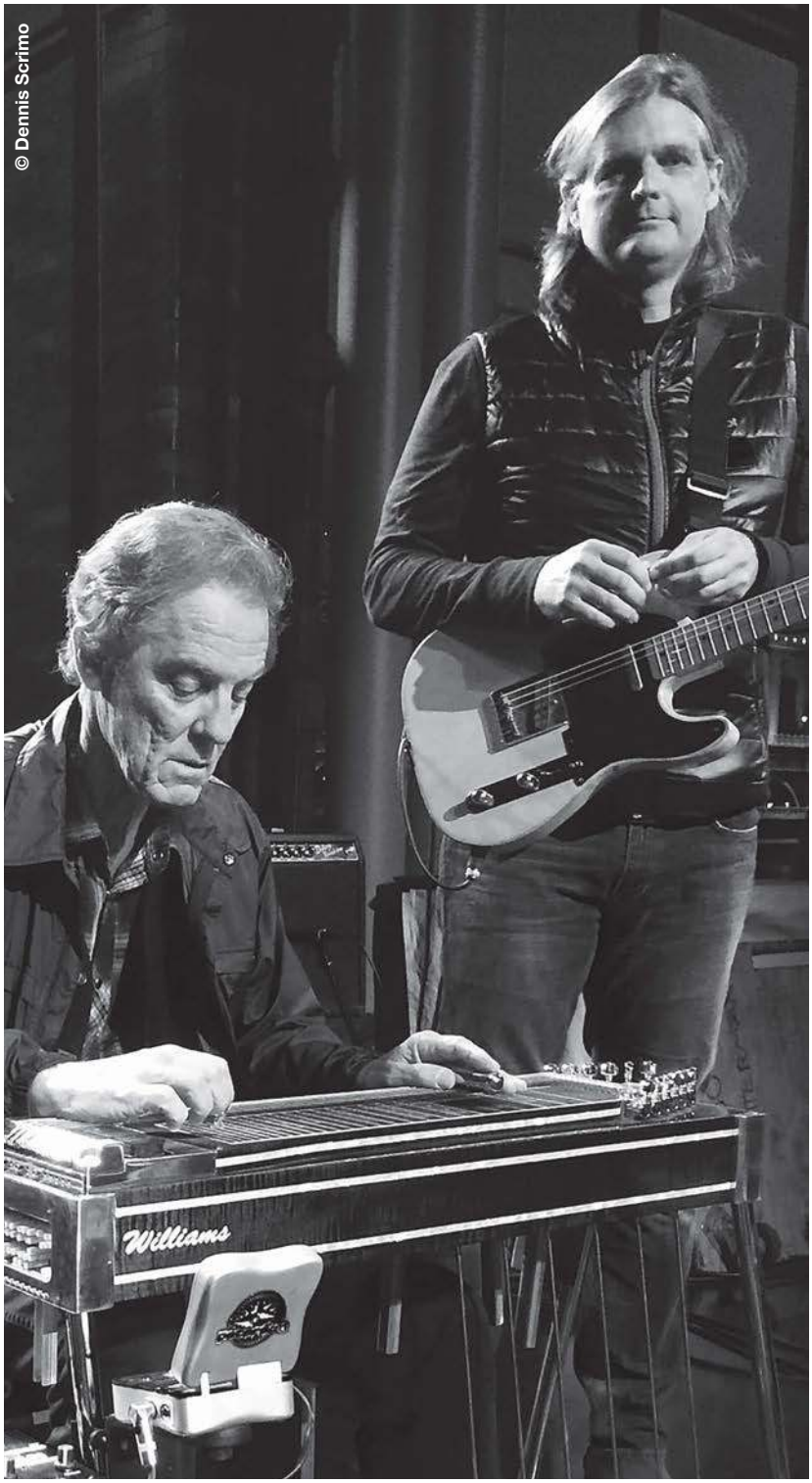
On performing with Jackson Browne, Val says: "Playing alongside Jackson is kind of hard to beat. I'm doing what I've wanted to do my entire life. Jackson loves guitar, and being given the freedom to express myself as a guitar player, especially over the music of one of the greatest songwriters of all time... it's just kind of 'pinch yourself' stuff, you know?

"On a gig, he just wants you to play – and when I solo, I close my eyes a lot. When I open them and look over, he's there paying attention – he'll walk over and be listening... it doesn't get much better than that."

McCallum developed his own style and chemistry to suit Browne's repertoire, including emulating David Lindley's parts. "I've done this gig in many configurations now, and when I was the only guitar player, I would play the classic Lindley *Running On Empty* solo bottleneck-style," he says. "I love slide guitar, but it's not necessary now, as we have Greg Leisz [Dobro, lap- and pedal-steel] in the band. So it's pretty much 'guitar heaven' – and I learn so much from trading solos with Greg."

TAKE A SAD SONG...

As he works on the final stages of his new album *Chateauguay* (named after the woodland behind his Vermont home), Val McCallum's own songwriting prowess is tinged with sadness, as his earlier solo album *At The End Of The Day* testifies. "It's a very personal record, and I was able to pull it all together thanks to my friend and producer Tony Berg – and my writing partner



VAL'S BIG BREAK

As he was to so many people, Fred Walecki became Val's friend and mentor, and encouraged the 24-year-old McCallum to audition for Warren Zevon, who was looking for a guitar player, having just finished recording his *Sentimental Hygiene* album. "I was pretty nervous, as I hated auditioning, and this record had a lot of [slide aficionado] David Lindley guitar on it," he says.

"I told them up front I wasn't a great slide player, but this was a very unusual audition anyway, because it went on for such a long time. Warren insisted on standing very close to me – wearing all grey and playing a grey guitar!"

As McCallum would find out some years later from working with Zevon's daughter Ariel, Warren suffered with OCD and was obsessed with all things grey. Val also boned up on his slide playing, and became very serious about bottleneck. He also developed a passion for lap-steel.

Above **Val McCallum puts his 1958 Jazzmaster through its paces – the backline includes a 1959 Fender Bandmaster and a 1960s Dumble-modded Deluxe Reverb**

Dillon O'Brien," he tells us. "I lost my brother Jason back in 1989 to a drug overdose, then my mother died from cancer six months later. There's a song about Jason called *Deal With It*, which I wrote with my mother in the six-month period before she passed away. She was really sick from the treatments, but so thrilled we could write a song together," he says.

Reminiscing about happier times, Val remembers the Giannini classical guitar – along with three others for his brothers, which he found under the tree one Christmas. "Charlie was really annoyed with me, because I covered it with motor-oil stickers from my other passion, motorbikes," he laughs.

Those days are a far cry from Val's current touring rig. He takes eight guitars on the road – some tuned down a half step – and a 1957 Fender Esquire a full step down for when Jackson sings *These Days*, *In The Shape Of A Heart*, *Sky Blue And Black* and *The Naked Ride Home*. McCallum takes up the story: "I've got a 1958 Fender Jazzmaster with an anodised pickguard in standard tuning, and I use that a lot. When we play *Looking East*, I use my '64 Gibson Firebird that has been modified to take two early Patent Number humbuckers – it's sacrilegious I know, but I bought it that way and it sounds very SG-like."

So what else is in the flightcase? "I've got two Danocasters, one with a P-90 in the neck and a humbucker in the bridge, the other a standard blackguard Tele replica," he says. "My favourite Tele has Willie Nelson's autograph on it – and that's my 'security blanket'. I'm a Tele kind of guy," he laughs.

McCallum has a pretty impressive backline, too – with an Alexander Dumble modified mid-60s Fender Deluxe Reverb and a 1959 3x10 tweed Bandmaster. "I waited seven years for him to complete the Deluxe, but I'm not allowed to tell you what he did to it!" says Val. He keeps effects to a minimum, with the erstwhile Line 6 DL4 (he has a stash of them) or a Boss DD-7 handling delay duties. A Strymon Flint for reverb and tremolo and a pair of Menatone The Red Snappers for overdrive complete Val's pedalboard. In his home studio, Val has a bunch of different guitars that he enjoys; particularly a '64 Gibson SG. "I find it the perfect guitar for everything, in a way. Slide, clean or overdriven sounds, it covers them all," he tells us. "I also have these 'Coodercasters' – built just like Ry Cooder's Stratocaster."

However, one of these rarities nearly went walkabout when McCallum's pal Blake Mills came over to the studio. "Blake played my Coodercaster and he really liked it," says Val. "Blake is a brilliant slide player, and he asked if he could borrow it for awhile. After a few weeks, I called him up and asked where my guitar was. Blake replied: 'I can't really be without this guitar…' I said: 'Well, you're going to have to be,' and even though he offered me a lot of money, he eventually brought it back," he laughs.

JEFF BECK – GUITARIST'S GUITARIST

Life changed considerably when Val tuned into Jeff Beck for the first time. "Jeff Beck has been a constant for me, and he's someone who just keeps getting better and better," Val continues. "Jeff does something that nobody else does. When I first heard *Blow By Blow* on a friend's recommendation, I didn't care much about anything else."

McCallum was smitten by Beck's technique and chops. "Jeff has always been on another level, but this music was more about expressive melodic guitar playing." He continues: "The different sounds he pulls out of a Stratocaster, with just his hands, still blows my mind. There really should be a college course dedicated to *Blow By Blow* and *Wired*," he laughs.

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ALBUMS OF THE YEAR 2018

2018 was another fantastic year for guitar music, with hot new acts and returning veterans all bringing their A game. Here are our favourites of the last 12 months...

ALBUM OF THE YEAR

Jonathan Wilson
RARE BIRDS

Since charming fans of dreamy guitar-heavy psychedelia with 2013's *Fanfare*, Laurel Canyonite Jonathan Wilson has been a busy man making records for the likes of Father John Misty and Roy Harper, as well as touring the world as Roger Waters' lead guitarist.

It's the latter that shines through most on this, his much-anticipated third studio record. The spirit of Floyd is felt strongly here, from the *Dark Side Of The Moon*-aping opening chords of *Trafalgar* onwards.

The occasional interludes of 80s synths, drum machines and harpsichords are new, but one constant is Wilson's superlative and varied guitar work, effortlessly straddling prog, glam, folk, rock and everything in between. An album that was more than worth the wait.

WE SAID "Authenticity has always been the thing that sets Wilson apart from his revivalist peers, both sonically and atmospherically, and it's this care and attention that marks this out as the album of 2018"

DEBUT OF THE YEAR

Boy Azooga
1,2, KUNG FU!

The brainchild of Cardiff multi-instrumentalist Davey Newington, Boy Azooga's debut record provided a shot in the arm for British guitar music when it landed in June. A colourful and dynamic record with influences ranging from Pet Sounds to Tame Impala, and lyrical content lilting from suburban dreams to black-comedy novella, Boy Azooga might be the most interesting new British band of 2018.

WE SAID "A majestic debut that hints at even greater things to come"

REISSUE OF THE YEAR

Guns N' Roses
APPETITE FOR DESTRUCTION SUPER DELUXE EDITION

How do you improve one of the greatest albums ever made? Well, you can't, but this stunning (and stunningly expensive) reissue package certainly enhances the fan experience. And while the lithos, book and live cuts are great, the real gem is the 1986 Sound City session. It's the sound of lightning being captured in a bottle, and a band on the verge of superstardom.

WE SAID "This expansive boxset celebration is nothing short of a GN'R fan's ultimate fantasy fulfilled"

THE REST

First Aid Kit
RUINS

This fourth LP from Swedish folk duo Johanna and Klara Söderberg follows on from 2014's critically acclaimed *Stay Gold*. Full of melancholic nostalgia, Everly Brothers-style sibling harmonies and rich, layered compositions.

WE SAID "It's an album as suited to summer evenings as it is cold January afternoons"

The James Hunter Six
WHATEVER IT TAKES

Veteran Essex soul-man James Hunter dives further into the retro deep end on his latest offering. Recorded with Grammy-nominated Bosco Mann (of Amy Winehouse's *Back To Black* fame) and released on ultra-cool New York indie label Daptone Records, this could have been lifted straight out of 1967.

WE SAID "The star of the show is Hunter's voice – powerful and soulful, it illuminates these tracks with warmth and conviction"

Ezra Furman
TRANSANGELIC EXODUS

Furman reaffirms his status as the leader of the vagabonds. Fuzzy guitars, doo-wop melodies and detuned acoustics all warp into a glorious digital haze.

WE SAID "An artistic record that's as much a beacon for misfits looking for a genre-less creative idol"

Jimi Hendrix
BOTH SIDES OF THE SKY
13 fascinating recordings made between 1968 and 1970, 10 of which are previously unreleased, with many laid down with Billy Cox and Buddy Miles.
WE SAID "A testament to not just a great guitarist, but also to a man determined to create pathfinding music"

Nathaniel Rateliff & The Night Sweats
TEARING AT THE SEAMS
It's evidence of Rateliff's abilities that you find yourself singing along to *Tearing At The Seams* immediately. While his guitar work is understated and complimentary, it serves the songs perfectly and is hugely endearing.
WE SAID "Pure authenticity that wraps around you like a blanket and refuses to let go"

Gaz Coombes
WORLD'S STRONGEST MAN
Esoteric production, krautrock rhythms, spiky guitar riffs and malfunctioning keyboards reminiscent of Radiohead make this Coombes' most intriguing outing yet.
WE SAID "Coombes' songwriting has become increasingly refined over the years, and *World's Strongest Man* is a hugely impressive effort on the part of the ex-Supergrass man"

Eric Clapton
LIFE IN 12 BARS
A career-spanning look at Clapton's fascinating relationship with blues music, created to accompany the fascinating documentary of the same name.
WE SAID "Slowhand fans left nonplussed by Clapton's anaemic autobiography will find this biopic and soundtrack far more satisfying"

Father John Misty
GOD'S FAVORITE CUSTOMER
Half as long as its predecessor but packed with the wry wit, lush orchestration and yearning fragility that characterises Josh Tillman's best work.
WE SAID "A punchier, fat-free offering that fizzes with ferocious intelligence and emotional resonance"

Johnny Marr
CALL THE COMET
Brimming with Marr's trademark chime and jangle, *Call The Comet* references the past but reinvents it rather than leaning too heavily upon it. The former Smiths man's revival continues apace.
WE SAID "Its great pleasure is in how Marr seems driven to reclaim his musical past"

Patrick Sweany
ANCIENT NOISE
Ancient Noise doubles down on scuzzy rock to create an album of raw garage-blues tunes that give equal weight to his expressive guitar playing and his emotive vocals.
WE SAID "While his contemporaries might be moving away from what made them stars, *Ancient Noise* demonstrates that the blues still has plenty to offer"

Joe Bonamassa
REDEMPTION
13 albums in, Joe's love for the guitar hasn't waned. Zeppelin-esque riffery sits alongside minor-key ballads and atmospheric dobro, to create one of his finest cuts.
WE SAID "An album that's as eclectic, musically ambitious and boldly assured as anything he's done to date"

Spiritualized
AND NOTHING HURT
Written and recorded almost entirely by Jason Pierce at home in London, the result is one of his best records in years.
WE SAID "It captures the majestic but grounded vibe of the band's live shows wonderfully"

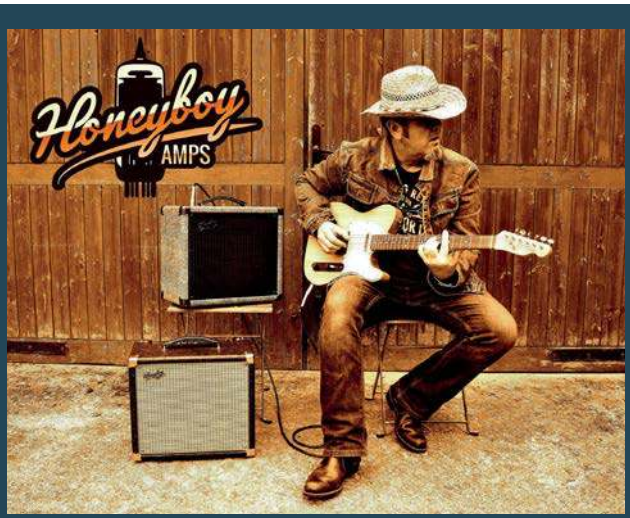
Kurt Vile
BOTTLE IT IN
Bottle It In reflects the globe-trotting success of Vile's last two albums. An LP about broadening horizons while holding fast to what made you special in the first place.
WE SAID "Kurt Vile's fabulously inventive guitar playing takes us on another epic sonic adventure"

Tides Of Man
EVERY NOTHING
Brooding ambience and percussive, industrial soundscapes with slick, syncopated guitar – *Every Nothing* showcases a band who are developing their very own brand of cinematic, grungey post-rock.
WE SAID "A thoroughly enjoyable journey with a band who are rapidly finding their feet"

Robben Ford
PURPLE HOUSE
Ford has put more emphasis on the production here than on previous outings, making *Purple House* a cohesive and creative record that's up there with the best of his recent work.
WE SAID "It's refreshing to hear an artist of Ford's stature expanding his horizons while still incorporating what his fans love"

Boygenius
BOYGENIUS EP
Kinetic guitar and chugging pop, acoustic ballads and gorgeous harmonies. Each member's distinct strengths have combined to become greater than the sum of their already impressive parts.
WE SAID "Sublime harmonies bring this remarkable EP to an end too soon. We're hoping a full album isn't far away"

J Mascis
ELASTIC DAYS
Primarily an acoustic affair, but with the occasional trademark Mascis solo, he demonstrates an impressive versatility both as an acoustic and electric guitar player. Mascis's vocal style suits acoustic balladry just as well as noisy grunge.
WE SAID "The recipe has been refined to create his best solo work yet"



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"Shimmering treble is layered over growling low-mids…our Gretsch has never sounded this good" - The Guitar Magazine

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While most of us know Ernie Ball for its guitar strings and as the parent company of Music Man guitars, the company's volume pedals took the world by storm and feature on a plethora of famous players' boards, thanks to their smooth taper and rugged, road-ready design.

Following on from the success of the range, the company has now revealed their Expression stompbox line, featuring an overdrive and tremolo, and the Ambient Delay. Thanks to our friends at Ernie Ball's UK distributor Strings & Things, you could win all three!

Unlike standard stompboxes, the Expression Overdrive, Expression Tremolo and Ambient Delay all avoid footswitches, instead opting for a treadle to give you complete tonal and textural control.

With a smooth-tapered overdrive control, the Expression Overdrive can deliver anything from natural, tube-amp break up to searing 80s lead tones with a near-effortless sweep. It also features settings for drive, tone and boost controls to ensure your dirt needs are catered for.

The Expression Tremolo – resplendent in a fetching metallic purple – features five distinct waveforms, including square and harmonic, plus a vintage-inspired spring reverb to add ambience to your pulsating soundscapes.

Last, but certainly not least, the Ambient Delay provides 50 milliseconds to one second of delay time, whilst also being layered with reverb, for everything from slapback to extended repeats. The effect level is fully controlled by the treadle for more textural integration.

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All three pedals feature a sleek, compact design that elevates your pedalboard's cool points without occupying too much real estate.

To find out more about Ernie Ball's pedal range, head over to ernieball.com, and to be in with a chance of winning, simply head to the link below and answer the following question:

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Q When did Ernie Ball start making guitar strings?
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VINTAGE MOJO

It's often said that vintage guitars are beyond the reach of hard-working musicians, but South Wales-based blues-rock guitarist Mark Pontin has assembled a fine collection of player-grade gear. We head to Llangennech's Sonic One Studio for a tour of Mark's vintage guitars and amps…

Story **Huw Price** Photography **Eleanor Jane**

Mark Pontin is an old friend of this writer, and it's been wonderful to watch him go from holding down a day job and gigging whenever he could, to fulfilling his lifelong ambition of being a professional musician. Even back in the day, he was a monster player, but Mark's musicianship has progressed considerably, while his taste in gear has evolved from powerful amps and reissue guitars to lower-power vintage amps and instruments.

Mark was seemingly always destined to be a guitarist. "My mum played a Spanish guitar when I was little," he recalls. "She would strum it for me and my little brother and sing songs. I remember being fascinated by that. When I was 11, she bought me a Spanish guitar and I spent the next five years hassling her to teach me. Eventually, I realised it would be better if I taught myself.

"Our parents had split up and every Christmas, my father would take us to Cardiff and ask what we wanted. One year, I asked for an electric guitar and he took me into the shop. I picked a Columbus copy of a Jackson with a fake Floyd Rose and the next day, I broke a string. I had to wait a whole week to take the guitar back and get them to

PRIVATE COLLECTION

show me how to change it. It wasn't a great guitar, but the floating trem got me doing something that I used to think was a bad habit, but I now consider a blessing. I would press on the bridge to get vibrato without using the arm.

"I'd broken three fingers on my left hand when I was in primary school and later on, I chopped the tip of my middle finger off at work – and I don't have much feeling in it. So finger vibrato was hard for me."

Never shy of a challenge, Mark has worked hard to overcome his digital setbacks. "I consider finger vibrato to be one of the most important techniques and it takes a long time to master," he explains. "Only now, in the last few years, have I been able to do it. I always wanted a vibrato like Rory Gallagher's and it comes slowly as your fingers get stronger and your ear for pitch gets better. Although I've always been mainly a Strat player, I never used the bar much. But that was mostly because my guitars would never stay in tune. I eventually got into it, but sometimes I forget the bar is there."

IT'S AS EC AS SRV

Mark's preference for Stratocasters goes all the way back to the beginning of his career. "I kept the Columbus for about a year and then my grandmother gave me the money to buy a Japanese Strat – a '57 reissue from Gamlin's Music Centre that I still have. I wanted one because of Mark Knopfler, but then I was blown away by Eric Clapton the first time I saw him.

"I started buying Clapton albums, which got me into Cream and then the John Mayall album, which took me further into the blues. Hendrix and Stevie Ray came later, and it was frightening listening to Stevie at first! I sort of came at it the opposite way to most people, because I was already listening to all the older blues guys and struggling to play like them, then suddenly, there was this younger guy playing that stuff at 100 miles per hour. I was an SRV freak for a while, but I make a conscious effort not to be, because there were so many others... and there still are. I've tried to develop my own thing."

It's fair to say Mark used to be a very loud player, but lately, he's developed an appreciation for lower-powered amps. "It was mostly because of sound engineers hassling me at gigs," Mark says, with a rueful smile. "I used to use a 4x12 with my '69 Marshall 100-watt Super Bass, which was my first vintage amp. We did a festival supporting Albert Lee and the sound guys just didn't want to know. I felt hampered by having to turn down so low, because Marshalls don't really work when you do that. I tried an attenuator, but the Super Bass would melt its solder joints. I went down to a 2x12. Then I tried a Super Reverb and that was too loud, but I noticed how good it sounded just plugging in – and that sparked my interest in older Fender amps.

"I'll still use a 40-watt amp in a smaller venue, and I use my Two-Rock Custom Reverb Signature on

Opening spread **From left to right, Mark's Telecaster collection includes a '64, a '63 Dakota Red refinish and a '67 'Smugglers'**

Opposite **Mark bought his '61 ash-bodied Strat at ATB Guitars – once he picked it up, he didn't even bother trying any of the other guitars that were on sale**

Above left **After cleaning off decades of sticky nicotine stains with naphtha, this guitar looks a lot better and is nicer to play**

Above top right **Traces of the Strat's smoky past life remain on the back of the headstock**

Above bottom right **Despite years of heavy use, the original plastics have survived in good condition**

Above left **This USA '62 Vintage Reissue was Mark's main Strat for many years and has the battle scars to prove it, while the Leslie cabinet provides rotating speaker tones in a relatively portable package**

Above right **With freshly installed 6100 frets, this 1965 Strat has become Mark's new favourite**

the half-power setting with a 1x12 with a Plexiglass screen in front. I don't often use my '66 Princeton or '58 tweed Deluxe live with my band, because the compression in the amps is too much for me to hit them with overdrives and boosts. My clean sound is always just the amp and if I crank some of the smaller amps to hear them over the drums, there's no headroom left for a lead tone. However, I do use them with my wife Ayesha's band, because we play quieter and it has more of a country/Americana feel, with reverb and tremolo, and no fuzz pedals.

"Recently, I bought a handwired Deluxe Reverb and that was a revelation, because it has enough headroom to do smallish gigs and mic'd-up bigger gigs, and it doesn't compress like sub-20-watt amps. It makes them more like mini Marshalls, but with Fender glassiness and the reverb. I never used to use reverb, but now I use it all the time. If I'm playing an amp without reverb, I'll use my Strymon Flint. Of all my amps, the Princeton has the sweetest sound and if I'm playing in a duo, it'll be just that amp with an OCD pedal. Even then, I'll barely use the OCD, because the Princeton has more than enough sustain to solo.

"My Pro Reverb sounded terrible until I changed the speakers. The originals couldn't handle the low end, so I put Scumbacks in there and now it's great. The Blackface Showman has a lovely warm clean sound, but I'm really looking for an old Deluxe Reverb."

> "OF ALL MY AMPS, THE PRINCETON HAS THE SWEETEST SOUND"

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Above **Once some jumbo frets have been installed, Mark expects his '61 Strat will become his main guitar**

Above left **Although refinished by Clive Brown, Mark is not convinced by the colour of this '56 Tele, but he can't fault the sound**

Above right **Telecasters from this era are nicknamed 'Smugglers' due to the weight-relieving routs under the pickguard**

Opposite **The '67 may have been refinished by Clive Brown, but you probably wouldn't know it**

AGEING GRACEFULLY

Mark only started playing vintage guitars quite recently, but his interest in them, and in older amps and pedals, goes way back. "I guess it was because of the players I was into and reading about vintage guitars in magazines," he suggests. "I always liked the look of early 60s Fenders with the green 'guards and the way they aged. A guy in college had an early 60s one that he let me play and I just got a feeling from it. I've never had that from any new ones. At a couple of points, I'd been able to buy one but didn't, and I regretted it. I'd bought a lot of reissues and amplifiers and I realised that all the money I'd spent could have got me a vintage Strat. Also, at the time, I didn't feel I deserved one, like I wasn't ready.

"My first vintage guitar was my '65 Strat and when I went up to try it at ATB [Guitars, in Cheltenham], it just had some mojo about it. It's my main guitar and it's starting to wear from my playing, so I'm putting my story onto it.

"ALL THE MONEY I'D SPENT ON REISSUES COULD'VE GOT ME A VINTAGE STRAT"

"It's a similar story with my '61 Blonde one. I went back to ATB Guitars and Mike Long put several out for me. It was the first one I tried and I didn't bother with any of the others, although the finish was yellowed up. Each time I gigged it, my arm would be yellow from nicotine stains and I'd smell like I did before the smoking ban! I wanted to

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Above, top **Mark has vintage Fender amps for all eventualities, including a '63 Showman, '66 Vibrolux, '64 Bassman, '74 Super Reverb, '72 Pro Reverb and a '66 Princeton Reverb**

Above left **Most of Mark's pedals are modern boutique items, but he does use a vintage Uni-Vibe and a couple of vintage wahs**

Opposite **A 2008 Gibson Les Paul R9 and a 2004 SG '61 Reissue lean up against a '69 Marshall Super Bass, a '72 P.A. 20 and a '63 Vox AC30 with a 'copper top' panel and original Celestion Blues**

enjoy playing it, so I gently wiped it with lighter fluid and it cleaned up easily.

"Vintage guitars are an inspiration, and they help me create and make me try to play better. The only downside is the attention it's drawn towards me. It's like people think I'm a millionaire, but it's taken me decades to trade up to these guitars and amps," Mark points out. "Sometimes, I sense a bit of jealousy, but for me, it's the fulfilment of a dream and I also see it as a marketing tool to arouse interest in my music and an investment for when I reach pensionable age that I can enjoy in the interim."

Mark admits to owning way too many pedals, and there are a few vintage gems among the modern-boutique stuff. "It took me a long time to find a Uni-Vibe without paying a fortune, but it's not really practical to gig with one. It's so noisy, but it sounds fantastic. I have a couple of vintage wahs, too: a V846 that sounds great for the *White Room* thing and a Jen Cry Baby that has the same circuit but with a 'trash can' inductor, rather than a TDK Fasel copy, so it sounds more *Shaft*."

TRANSATLANTIC TONES

British amps have long featured in Mark's backline, and there have been a couple of lucky finds. "Someone I knew mentioned that someone was getting rid of an AC30 and asked if I wanted to go and look at it. It was in his shed with a Flymo leaning up against it, but fortunately, it was pretty dry in there. He heaved it out, plugged it in and it didn't work. So he told me to come back after his mate had looked at it and, because he was a fan of my music, he gave me a great deal. It's a '63 with [Celestion] Blues and it didn't need much doing to it. The Marshall P.A. 20 was another bargain. I was playing in a bar in Barry and this guy came up and said: 'I've got just the amp for you.' I didn't know what a P.A. 20 was at the time, but I tried it and it sounded great. He wanted stupid money, so I turned him down, but then every few months, he'd call me back with a lower price. It got to Christmas one year and we reached a deal. I've used it a lot, because you get classic Plexi tone at 20 watts."

> "IT TOOK ME A LONG TIME TO FIND A UNI-VIBE WITHOUT PAYING A FORTUNE"

Although primarily a Strat player, Mark also has a soft spot for Telecasters. "My '56 Tele has a Clive Brown refin and there's a really big neck on it. It's a little bit heavy, but loads were back then. It's not the sweetest-sounding guitar unplugged, but when you plug it in, it sounds like that era. I don't know if it's a keeper yet, because I don't find myself drawn to it like the 60s ones. I play my '67 Smuggler's Tele the most.

The ’63 Dakota Red’s frets are too low for me at the moment, but that bridge pickup is something else. It has a vibe to it and once I get it refretted, I think that will be my number-one Tele. My blonde ’64 has been refretted and it’s a lovely guitar – but I’m still working on the setup and it’s too microphonic to use live with fuzz pedals.”

Mark has a few modern Gibsons, too, but they’re used more for recording than gigging. “I always feel like SGs are fragile, and I end up babying them because they all have tuning problems. I use SGs in the studio a lot for big riffs, but more on other people’s sessions than mine. Whenever I’m asked to do a session, I’ll take a Strat, Tele and an SG.”

ON THE RECORD

Over the last few months, Mark has been working on a new album and he sees it as a progression from his earlier work. “Over the last decade, my focus has been more on writing songs and developing as a singer.

“I did the ‘big guitar’ thing on my first album and although the second album is more song orientated, there’s still loads of guitar. This new one is more about expressing myself as an artist, rather than just a guitarist. It has real strings and brass, and I wrote all the parts, so it’s more eclectic, with a bit of soul and funk. I’ve used all vintage gear on the recordings, apart from one track where I played my Two-Rock. One of my favourite tones was when I put the ’56 Tele through the ’58 Deluxe and the ’66 Princeton Reverb and just turned them up. I even had some vibrato on the Princeton and that was just perfect.

“The new album will be called *Kaleidoscope*, basically because it’s all different flavours. It will be out around late April 2019 and I’ll be touring to promote it.”

If you want to hear Mark’s vintage gear in action, visit www.markpontingroup.com and www.ayeshapontin.com

Letters from *America*

BRIAN GERHARD

TOPHAT AMPLIFICATION

Boutique mainstay TopHat Amplification is the brainchild of North Carolina native Brian Gerhard, whose pioneering engineering and choice use of materials has kept him ahead of the game for 24 years and counting. Dave Hunter meets a designer who proves form is temporary, but class is permanent…

Boutique-amp makers will come and go, but among the smaller shops, one in particular has remained highly respected throughout its run: TopHat Amplification. Rarely does a guitarist who has played a TopHat have anything negative to say about the experience, and more often than not, they'll be happy to rave about the thing until well past closing time.

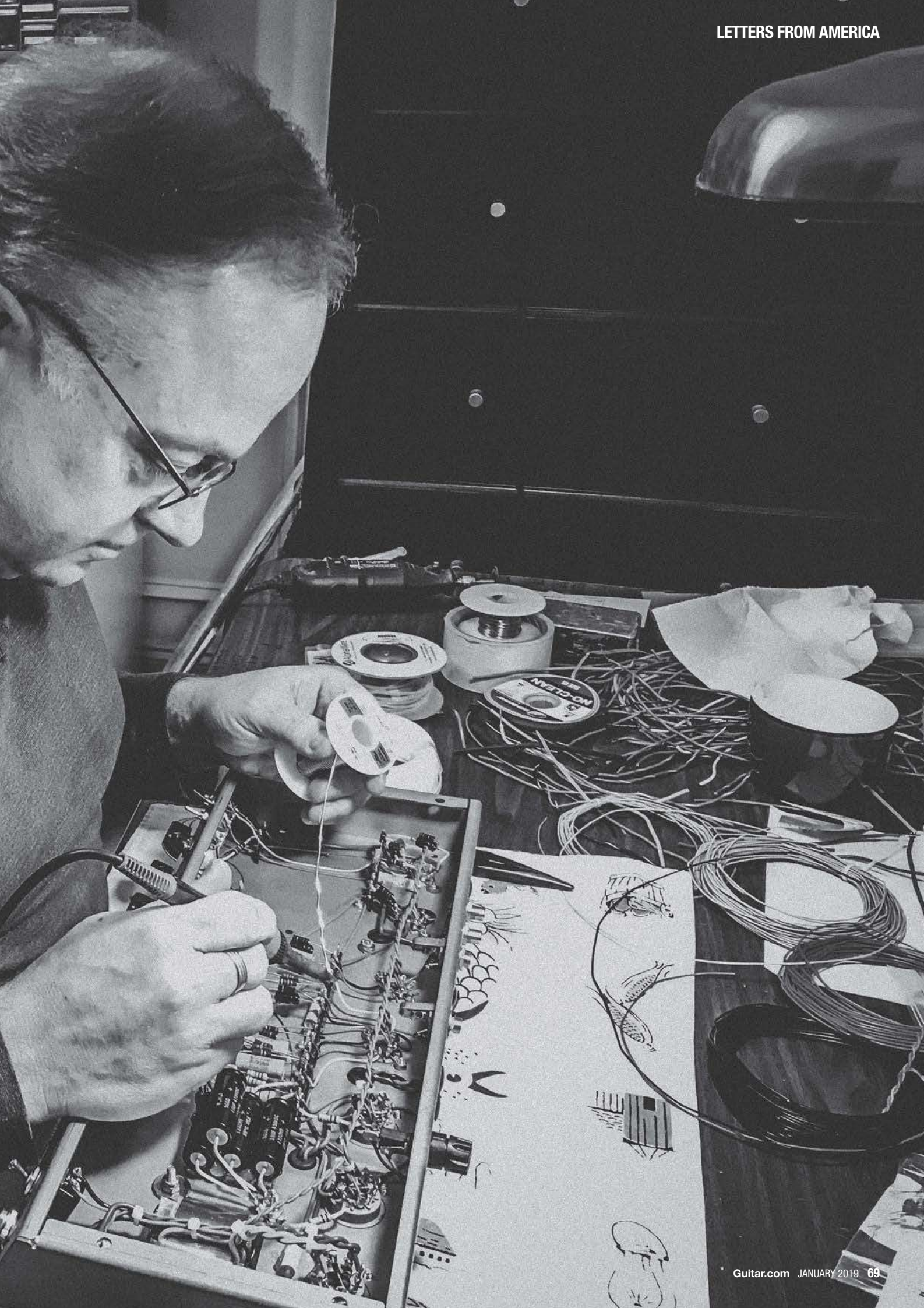
Without straying too heavily into 'blowing your own horn' territory, I'm pleased to recall that I reviewed the first TopHat ever tested by a British publication, right here in the pages of *The Guitar Magazine* around the turn of the millennium, after having met the man behind the brand at the previous Winter NAMM Show. It was the then-current iteration of the Club Royale combo, and it sounded glorious.

TopHat Amps was founded by Brian Gerhard in California in 1994, and his amps pretty quickly developed a great reputation among pros. A move back to his native North Carolina in 2005 saw the continued popularity – and design evolution – of models such as his Vox-meets-Marshall-esque Club Royale combo and Plexi-meets-JCM800-ish Emplexador head, as well as the development of new Custom Shop heads like the 16-watt Supreme 16 and 33-watt Vanderbilt. Throughout his 24 years in business, Gerhard has steadfastly refused to 'let it lie'. If a design is already good, it can almost always be made better – and every model he produces has continued to evolve toward the more perfect sonic image of itself, according to how this sound exists in its creator's head.

DELUXE INSPIRATION, BRIT LEANINGS

Most of us have heard the story before: boy meets simple hand-wired valve-amp circuit, boy builds circuit, boy falls in love. It's a tale as old as the hills, yet when it befalls a young man who also has an inherent knack for translating the epiphany into further sonic riches, it sometimes results in a little more than just a few hours of solo fun in the basement.

After building the occasional electronics kit in his youth and taking three years of electronics in high school, the young Gerhard went looking for a valve amp to build for himself, and discovered the ubiquitous tweed Deluxe circuit. "When you hear one for the first time when you've done it yourself, you go: 'Oh, that's pretty


NO-CLEAN

nice!' You know, compared to a high-gain Marshall type thing of the era, you hear this big, glorious richness of a simple design with a few parts, and it turns you on pretty quick."

Given this beginning, it might seem odd that Gerhard and TopHat et al would years later become best known for making amps that were largely inspired by classic British rock. But there's still some continuity to this thread, and a certain logic in moving from American tweed to British rock tones.

"All the early Marshall stuff comes straight from a tweed Bassman," Gerhard points out. "That's why the standout oddball is the [Fender] Blackface: that is the other end of the world. The Bassman goes into the Marshall and the Vox, and the similarities in the Top Boost Vox and the early Marshalls that come from the '59 Bassman, that's why all those are tied together. And that's a lot of greatness right there for the vintage era."

THEORY OF EVOLUTION

Through two-and-a-half decades of designing and manufacturing amps, Gerhard has seen a lot of changes in the so-called 'boutique' market. Aside from the general progression through obsessions with reproduction tweed amps, then early JMI Vox designs, then a major upsurge in Marshall mania – all three of which remain well represented today – he has had to weather no end of highly touted new start-ups and flashy fly-by-night operations in a social-media-fuelled world that is primed to rave about the Next Big Thing more than the tried, tested, and true. Top-quality workmanship, excellent customer service and a knack for meeting the needs of touring pros and weekend warriors alike have all helped to keep TopHat in the game, but Gerhard has also embraced the need to adapt and evolve over the years.

"In an ever-tougher environment, that is the driving force to change," Gerhard says of this need to keep moving forward. "There's a psychological reality that with my target consumer, if something just sits there forever, there's nothing to inspire or spur the purchase, if you will."

In addition to the need for the new, of course, there's also the simple realisation from a lifelong tone obsessive that just about anything great can always be made better. You discover a new source for a signal capacitor that you'd like to use in your circuits, or try a different output transformer that delivers a sweeter and more vintage-like distortion, or enlarge a combo cabinet slightly and, voila! – you're a little closer to the magic. "You can do anything and not mess up or rearrange the itself, where you're bypassing the EQ and the master. And I've always continued to improve the output transformer; that's a critical part of it, upgrading that as well. I have continued working to achieve better balance, and refine it, ever-better, as you can. But like I say, if it looked the same, and the features were the same, and nothing changed, I don't think that's a winning formula in today's radically saturated marketplace."

MASTER AND COMMANDER

One trend in live music that has had to be addressed by any amp maker seeking to stay afloat is the steady decline in stage volumes, with small clubs and pro tours alike insisting on lower and lower decibel levels on stage over the past couple of decades. For Gerhard the amp designer, the necessity of going with the flow somewhat runs against the grain, yet it's a trend he has had to embrace.

"When I first started, I was Johnny Purist," he tells us, "and I did stuff without master volumes. Now, the number-one requirement is a master volume, and in the modern day, there have been other versions of lowering the output down – power-scaling and whatever. I kind of object, just in general, to those who want to sell some magic way to achieve full-out power to scale down to a quarter of a watt and pretend that everything is happening like it does when it's playing up loud.

"You can make it sound *good* when it's at that reduced level, but I think so many people sell it like – since the beginning of attenuators, really – that you can crank up your Marshall to

> "ADDING MORE VERSATILITY MEANS MORE BANG FOR YOUR BUCK. MORE FEATURES, MORE CAPABILITY – IN A WAY THAT DOESN'T DRIVE THE PRICE UP"

formula too much," Gerhard says, "but add more versatility, that makes it a more useful tool. It makes it work in more environments, or work well with more guitars. More bang for your buck – more features, more capability – in a way that doesn't drive the price up, but you're adding more value for the dollar.

"Of course, there's the aesthetics, too, which is another issue. For example, on the Club Royale, we've gone through and made a new look and style available, but it's a concerted effort: the look of it is very new and different, with the vents on top and the piping over the top and bottom from front to back. [You take the] V-Front look and then correlate it to the Mark V series, and then the faceplate, too. It's a somewhat more vintage-Marshall looking cab whereas before, it was more Vox-looking. Then you add the ability to drop down to the stock AC30 channel by

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full-tilt boogie then 'woah' it down to bedroom levels and it's going to act and breathe and move the speakers in the normal way that it does. Which you simply can't, because the speakers act differently at different power levels, they compress and saturate differently and it just doesn't sound the same."

Ultimately, Gerhard acknowledges, guitarists and amp makers alike come up against the physical fact that quiet amps and speakers just don't sound the same as loud amps and speakers – however similar their gain structure, harmonic content, and general voicing, and so on – and yet the former category seems a reality of live performance today that just isn't going away.

"You can knock down the volume level at any stage: in the preamp, in the middle of the preamp, at the end of the preamp, between the phase inverter and the power tubes, and now between the output transformer and the speaker, and ultimately some crazy people have made some very, very expensive speakers where you can vary the magnets on the speakers, so you take it right down to the speaker by losing the efficiency. But none of them – either one, or all together – sounds exactly the same as a cranked amp playing loud."

GRAIN AND GAIN

Any maker who has been in the business this long encounters new 'Eureka!' moments every so often, which set off that lightbulb above the head and present a sonic revelation that helps them turn a new corner, design-wise. The latest one of these for Gerhard himself involved one of the more mundane elements within the entire construction of any amplifier, yet it induced a more radical transformation of tone than would the swapping of almost any other single component.

While developing his latest model, the Rialto Reverb, Gerhard tested out several cab designs to help take this little-modified Princeton-style 1x12 combo from sweet to screaming – and one discovery proved a major eye opener.

As he puts it: "I had quite an epiphany of pine versus Baltic birch. Clean-to-medium drive, pine is fine, it doesn't really hurt you and is warm and sweet and all. But you go full, pounding-chord, British kind of rock 'n' roll, more like a Marshall rock sound or just that level of distortion when you're fully pushing it, it's night and day, good and evil: pine sucks ass into distortion. When you have a speaker that can articulate, the delicate front end of the distorted note becomes mudded out so severely in a pine cab that it literally ruins the distortion.

"I learned very clearly: I had a 10-inch and a 12-inch regular Princeton cab and I liked it even with the little Greenback 10, it works cool with a G12H, and the Vintage 30 lets it be the most Fender-y. But when I went out of the pine ones and into my normal 1x12 Baltic-birch cab, holy shit! The fucking light shone and I heard, oh my god, the difference! And then recognised it's down to the woods – it's not even the cab design, but just having that harder wood, more firmly holding the baffle, etc, where the speaker can articulate when you really start punching distortion. The pine is dull and whatever and it's not offensive, because it's not pointed or sharp or ugly, but it muds it out to where it's a turdball. You would be *a-mazed*. It's black and white, there are no shades of grey. One is awesome and one sucks: poor distortion."

LATEST FLAME

Part of what makes the Baltic-birch cabinet a necessity for the new model is the über versatility of the design itself. Otherwise a simple re-imagining of the Blackface Princeton Reverb, the Rialto Reverb takes advantage of the fact that the 60s Princeton was the only Fender model to retain the gritty, potentially raw and hairy split-load phase inverter that so many models used in the tweed era, the 5E3 tweed Deluxe included.

Via simple switching options enabling the user to bypass the treble and bass controls (tapping instead a two-way bright switch), or to bypass the reverb, or to engage an additional gain stage, Gerhard evokes at least four classic studio- and small-club-friendly classics in one package: tweed Deluxe, Brownface Princeton, Blackface Princeton Reverb, and Blackface Princeton non-reverb, plus some previously unavailable voices.

"If you bypass the EQ and the reverb, this thing will get very gainy," says Gerhard, "beyond brown-Princeton and tweed-Deluxe gain. Because you realise those have no reverb and no EQ, so you really see perfectly how much the reverb bogs down [the Princeton Reverb] circuit and the EQ bogs it down.

"That's why they made that extra gain stage, because the loss is so great through the EQ and the reverb. But the tweed Deluxe and the brown Princeton are in the low-gain mode, they don't need it. That phase inverter has the preceding full-gain gain stage, so it's a hot kind of phase inverter, and that's why it doesn't need much gain coming into it to get pretty aggressive."

Looked at another way, creative design such as that seen in the versatile little Rialto Reverb is yet another way of addressing the volume wars, by providing a fully breathing, roaring little tone machine in a package that sounds good at all volume levels, but won't ever blow the roof off the venue, as Gerhard affirms.

"Every little bit you hear of what goes on in that comfy little 10-watt chassis is so beautiful that a little bigger exposure of it is just all for the good – and then in a cab that can articulate it. It's just so awesome to be fully up in the power zone, into the sweet spot of the amp and to have it where you can practically talk over it."

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Gibson

VINTAGE BENCH TEST

1964 GIBSON FIREBIRD VII

Like the V and Explorer before it, Gibson's 60s Firebird range was a radical rethink of the possibilities of guitar design. Of the many Firebirds over the years, the VII is regarded as the pinnacle. Huw Price lights one up...

Although Ray Dietrich's Firebird may appear on the surface to be a toned-down version of the Explorer, it's actually a more radical design. Even today, through-neck guitars are hardly commonplace, so in 1963, the Firebird's construction was truly groundbreaking. The VII we have here is characterised by its three mini-humbucker pickups, an ABR-1 bridge and a Maestro Vibrola – and as befits a top-of-the-line model, all the hardware is gold-plated, too.

This example's overall condition is wonderful; it's clearly been well played and there's lateral lacquer checking all across the body, neck and headstock. On the back, the finish is a fairly uniform tobacco brown, with the mahogany grain clearly visible – especially where it's slightly lighter on the back of the neck. At the front, the tobacco brown tips over the edges and the sunburst transitions to a more amber centre, with a hint of redness at the crossover. The pickguard has a mellow, aged quality, with a touch of wear on the Firebird logo and shrinkage around the screw holes. The hole at the end of the horn has three cracks but is hanging together, unlike the corner in the cutaway, which has snapped off.

IN USE

On a personal note, this writer has always had a thing for reverse-bodied Firebirds. Maybe it's

Above **Uniquely among the Gibson mini-humbucker family, Firebird pickup coils are wound around alnico V bar magnets and have closed covers**

an affection for Southern rock – or perhaps it was that Firebird on the wall of a long-vanished music shop he once ogled but never dared to try as a teenager. Finally having the opportunity to spend some quality time with a Firebird VII, he's now forced to admit that they make him look a bit ridiculous.

If you're rakishly thin, over six feet tall and have long flowing locks, this guitar will make a 70s rock god of you. But if you look more like a shorter, chubbier and Welsher version of Hugh Grant, you may need to think this one through. Joking aside, though, with reverse Firebirds there are some serious ergonomic as well as aesthetic considerations.

Firebirds are five inches longer than Strats and some things don't quite line up where you'd normally expect them to be. For instance, there alway seems to be a two-fret offset, but Jazzmasters can be similar – and it's easy enough to adjust to. Perpetually grabbing the wrong tuner also comes with the territory, but that takes longer to overcome.

THE FIREBIRD IS A GUITAR THAT DEMANDS SOME COMMITMENT

The startling imbalance caused by the sheer mass of those banjo tuners obliges you to hang on for the ride at all times. It's little wonder that this specimen must be one of relatively few to have survived the last four decades without a headstock repair: from both a playing and ownership perspective, this is a guitar that demands some commitment.

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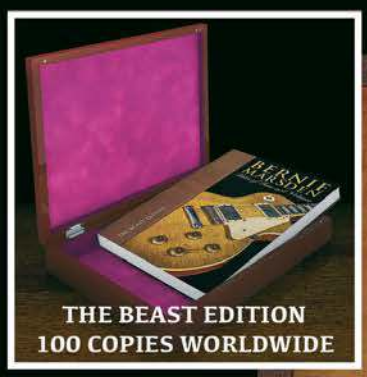

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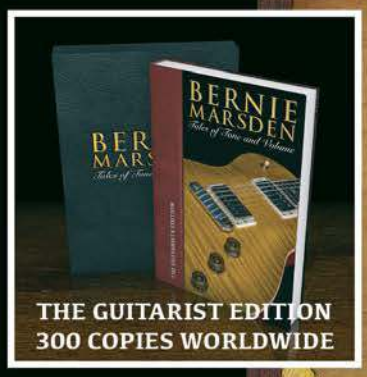

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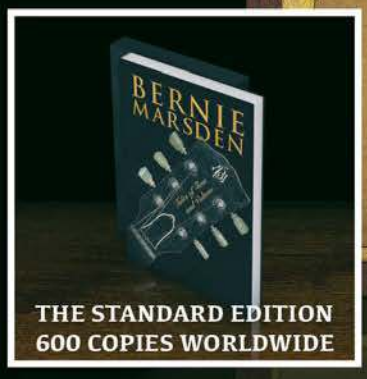

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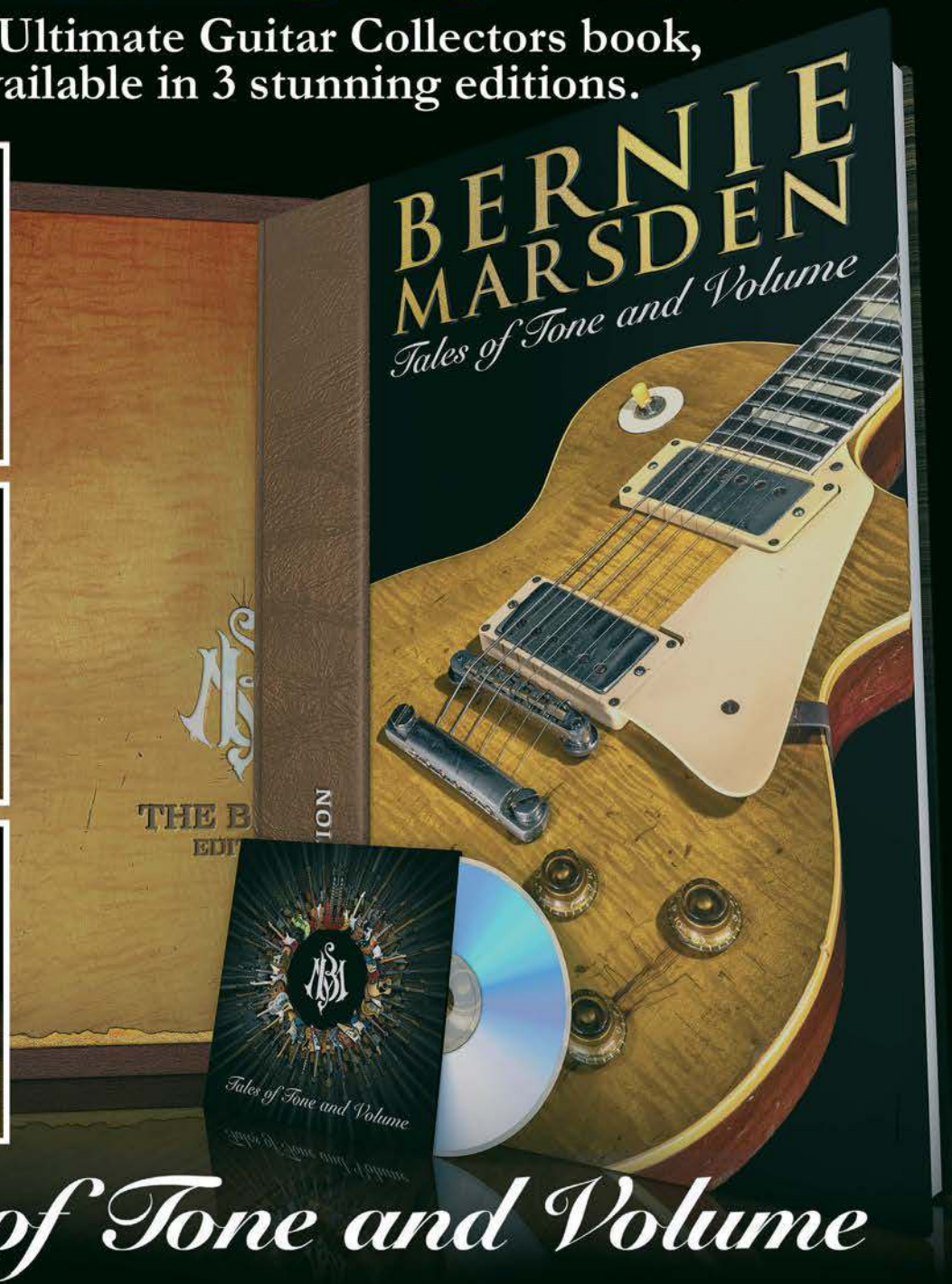

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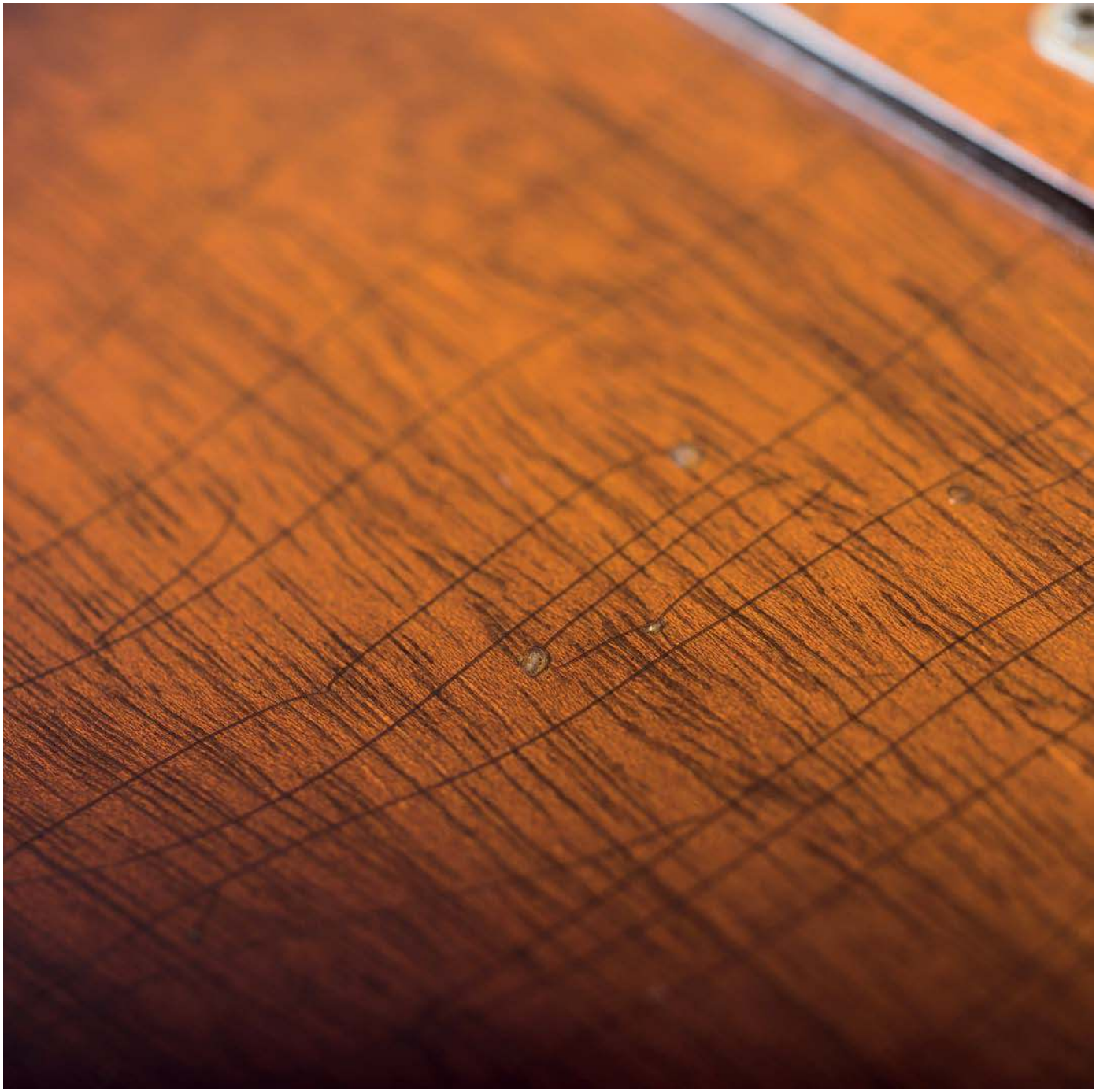

That said, everything else about this guitar makes for a very easy playing experience. The medium-depth neck benefits from soft shoulders and the gentle heel carve combines with a deep cutaway to make the ebony fretboard 'access all areas'. It's a super-smooth surface and, with plenty of life in these frets, string bends feel effortless.

Although some attempt has clearly been made to set the intonation, some saddles are at their limit and yet the intonation is still slightly off. There may be some scope for improvement if some of the saddles are spun around, but it may be that Gibson simply installed the bridge too close to the neck in the first place. The company had form on this, which is why some vintage Gibsons – 50s 'Bursts included – have been modified with relocated post holes.

The vibrato is fun, and you get about as much pitch fluctuation as you would with a Bigsby-equipped Telecaster. Adding gentle vibrato to chords and bent notes is fine, and so long as you don't get crazy, the tuning holds true.

> WITH PLENTY OF LIFE IN THESE FRETS, BENDS FEEL EFFORTLESS

The unplugged tone promises great things and it's way more complex than a slightly later non-reverse Firebird we have on hand to compare. It has a similarly dense harmonic 'sprang', but there's also some of the nasal woodiness we tend to associate with semi-acoustics and really resonant Les Pauls. The Firebird adds something of its own, too, with

Opposite **The vibrato's cover serves no practical purpose, but with the 'lyre' motif, it's part of the Firebird aesthetic**

Above **Although the finish is in great shape, there's plenty of lacquer checking, which serves to enhance the vintage character of this VII**

Above **These banjo tuners add considerable mass to the headstock and require a mindset shift if you're used to playing Fenders**

Opposite, middle **The bound ebony fingerboard remains in fine condition and there's plenty more life left in the frets**

Opposite, bottom
The neck profile has very little shoulder and it's a very comfortable guitar to play

Next page, top
Just in case you weren't sure, there's a Firebird logo on the pickguard, adjacent to the selector switch

Next page, middle
Just like Fender pickguards of the era, plastic shrinkage coupled with fixed screws results in pieces snapping off

Next page, bottom
More evidence of shrinkage can be seen around this pickguard screw

deep but clear lows, surprisingly chimey treble and the sort of sustain that through-neck construction promises, but often fails to deliver.

WE HAVE RARELY HEARD SO MUCH PUNCH FROM A NECK PICKUP

LITTLE WONDERS

It's remarkable how much of the acoustic character comes through these mini-humbuckers. There's a touch of microphony, which no doubt helps, combined with extended treble and a serious bit of poke. Common comparisons to Strats are largely based on the Firebird's brightness, but this is a loud, clear and powerful guitar that has its own creamy and vocal character.

Spend a minute on the bridge and you'll understand why Allen Collins favoured a Firebird to cut through Skynyrd's three-guitar line-up – even if he did have a P-90 in the bridge. We have rarely heard so much punch from a neck pickup and although it's set low in the body, it produces just as much level as the throatier and more wiry bridge. Both pickups provide an intriguing mix

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KEY FEATURES

1964 Gibson Firebird VII

- **PRICE** £14,995
- **DESCRIPTION** Solidbody electric guitar. Made in USA
- **BUILD** Mahogany body with mahogany through-neck, bound ebony fingerboard, 22 frets
- **HARDWARE** Banjo tuners, ABR-1 bridge, Maestro Vibrola
- **ELECTRICS** 3x mini-humbucker pickups, 2x volume, 2x tone, 3-way switch
- **FINISH** Nitrocellulose sunburst
- **SCALE LENGTH** 624mm/24.5"
- **NECK WIDTH** 42.2mm at nut, 52mm at 12th fret
- **NECK DEPTH** 19.5mm at first fret, 22mm at 12th fret
- **STRING SPACING** 34.3mm at nut, 50.4mm at bridge
- **WEIGHT** 4.1kg/9lbs
- **CONTACT** ATB Guitars **www.atbguitars.com**

of sonic power and transparency, and they offer great dynamic response.

We're not entirely sure if we have a handle on what the middle pickup is doing, because there are some intermittent electronics issues. Initially, it sounds like it's wired out-of-phase with the others, which proves to be a fabulously funky but meaty tone. Then things begin

THE NECK AND BRIDGE PICKUPS OFFER GREAT DYNAMIC RESPONSE

going awry, the middle setting eventually cutting out, but the guys at ATB Guitars will doubtless remedy any wiring issues ahead of a prospective sale.

As cool as Firebird VIIs are, we're not convinced that the funky middle setting and some of the other interesting sounds we get to hear (all too briefly) warrant the added clutter and complication of the controls. Although we suspect we'd enjoy a twin-pickup Firebird V or perhaps a Firebird III even more, this is the top-of-the-range Firebird... and it's a wonderful example.

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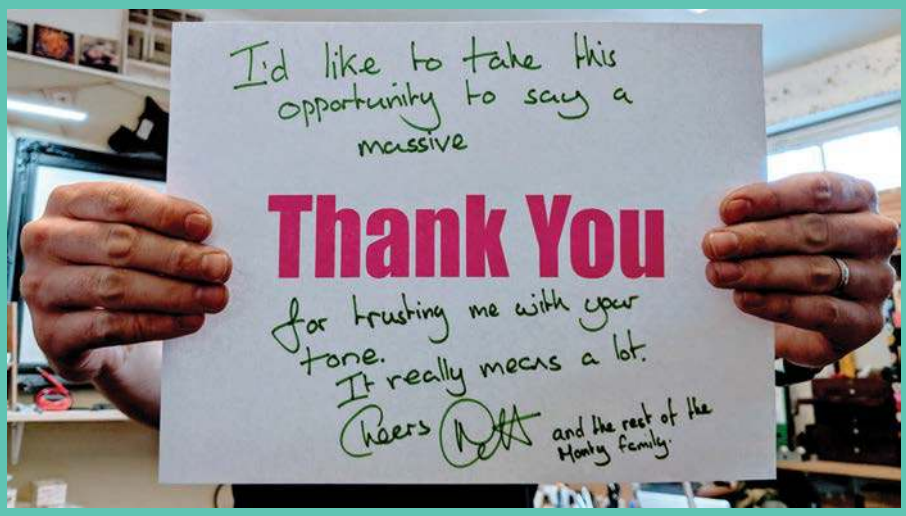

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Photograph courtesy of *Fender: The Golden Age*, taken by Paul Kelly

DOC KAUFFMAN

Leo Fender's decision to get into the guitar-manufacturing business was perhaps surpising given that he didn't play the instrument himself... but he knew a man who did. Without Doc Kauffmann, Fender guitars and amps might never have existed. Huw Price investigates...

Like Leo Fender, Clayton Orr 'Doc' Kauffmann came from a farming family. Doc moved to California from Pratt County, Kansas in 1920 – he'd studied violin and could play guitar and saxophone, so he landed a job providing musical accompaniment for silent movies. After returning to Kansas and getting married, Doc was back in California by 1922 and working as an instrument repairer and piano tuner.

Although guys who tinkered around inventing stuff were often called 'Doc', that's not how Doc Kauffman got his nickname. One day he arrived at the wrong address and was ushered into a room where a woman was having a baby. Seeing the black bag he carried for his piano-tuning equipment, the family had assumed he was a doctor. When his colleagues found out, they started calling him Doc and it stuck.

As a youngster, Doc was always building things – including steam engines, milk cans, farm machinery, tools, radios, police transmitters and even a motorcycle. In California, he worked on musical instruments, and designed a pitch-changing device to liven up an uninspiring tenor guitar. Later, he built one for a six-string Gibson, which he'd use with one of his home-made amplifiers.

DOC 'N' VIBROLA

Doc's patent application for an 'Apparatus For Producing Tremolo Effects' was filed 19 August 1929 and granted 5 January 1932 (US1839395A). Strictly speaking, pitch-shifting is properly called vibrato, but throughout his patent application, Doc used the term 'tremolo effect'.

Later on, the Fender Stratocaster would have a 'Syncronized Tremolo' bridge and on any Fender amplifier with a tremolo circuit, the effect would be described as 'vibrato'. So Doc's misunderstanding – if that's what it was – has been perpetuated to this day.

In 1929, Doc met George Beauchamp, who was working with Paul Barth and Adolph Rickenbacher at the National String Instrument Corporation. The trio formed their own guitar company in 1931 and by 1933, it was trading as Rickenbacker Electro. Although Doc was good friends with all three men, there was no job for him, but he did strike a deal for Rickenbacker to manufacture and market his 'tremolo' and it became known as 'The Rickenbacker Vibrola'.

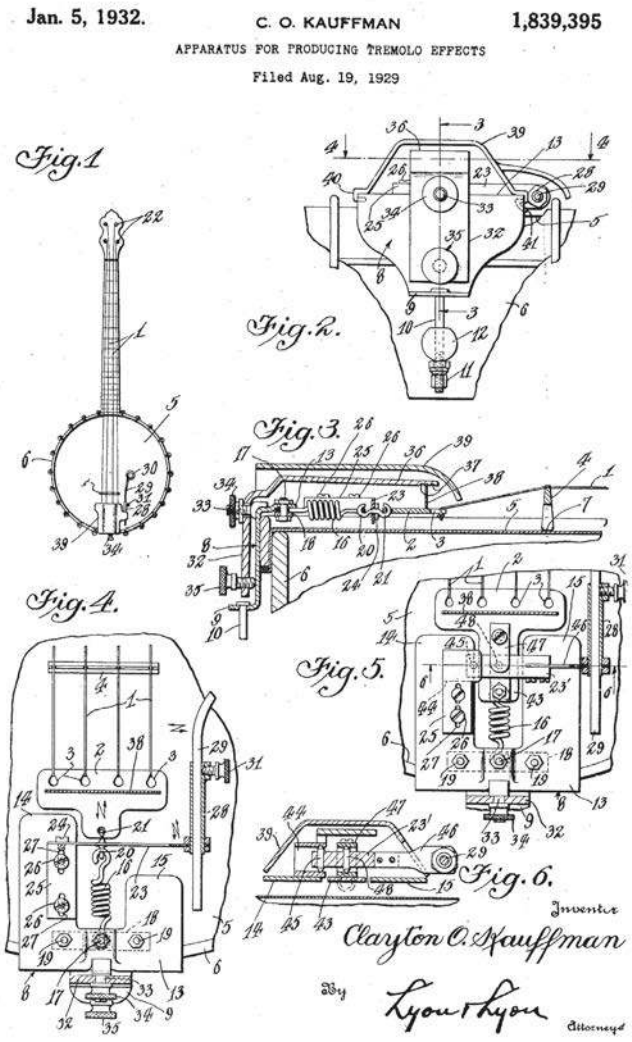
As probably the first commercially available mechanical vibrato device for stringed instruments, Doc's Vibrola was originally fitted to early Rickenbacker lap-steels. This is significant, because the Vibrola's arm moved in an arc across the strings, rather than up and down. It made perfect sense for playing lap-style, but proved less popular when Gibson later revived the idea with the remarkably similar Sideways Vibrola.

Considering it pre-dated Paul Bigsby's design, Doc's device clearly worked well enough. His old friend Les Paul used them on his guitars for many years, including the infamous 'Log' and the early Goldtops. Chet Atkins had Doc's Vibrola fitted to his D'Angelico and the Gretsch 6120 prototype, and Rickenbacker continued using it well into the Rossmeisl era.

Doc also designed a guitar with an integral motor and an offset cam that could produce an automated vibrato effect. Rickenbacker introduced it as the Vibrola guitar in 1937 at a price of $175.

THE DOC IS IN

Leo Fender told Tom Wheeler: "I had seen Doc back in the mid 1930s. He used to play in storefronts to draw a little business for the store and also to sign up a few students for himself. But I didn't meet him and talk to him until maybe 1941." Doc recalled of that meeting: "Leo came in one day and he said: 'Hey, you've been building guitars around here, do you want to build some together?' And I said: 'Well sure, sounds okay to me.'"



By now, Doc was much more than a hobbyist. He'd been building and selling amplifiers and Rickenbacker-style lap-steels, even winding his own pickups and using magnets from a Ford Model T car. Leo was struggling to make decent-sounding pickups, so he must have been intrigued to learn Doc had a winding machine from Rickenbacker.

Initially, Doc carried on working for Douglas Aircraft and did after-hours repairs at Leo's place. By 1943, Leo and Doc had built their first solidbody guitar, which they'd hire to local musicians. The guitar was in great demand and clearly Leo must have spotted the commercial potential in making solidbody electrics, but in the meantime, he and Doc concentrated on building lap-steels and small amplifiers under the K&F monicker.

It was apparently Doc's idea to dispense with the then-common practice of mounting the amp chassis at the bottom of a cabinet. He reasoned that moving it to the top would keep the electronic components safe and the controls would be easier to adjust.

They also built a record-changing device that raised about $5,000 and although the business was doing well, Leo recalls that: "K&F began to take up so much of an investment that Doc began to get worried, and he was afraid that some property he had in Oklahoma might go down the drain if we failed."

According to Doc: "I got scared of the business. I had been saving money through the war, and I wanted to get a home and pay for it. My dad was a credit boy all his life, owed money on the farm and everything, so I told myself I'd never go into debt." He was also aware that Leo had no such qualms. "I didn't have much faith in guitars," Doc admitted, "and I asked Leo to buy out my half of the business." According to Leo: "Doc had released everything to me; he took a small punch press and we called it an even trade." So, the K&F company lasted only from the autumn of 1945 to around February 1946. When Leo founded Fender Manufacturing in 1946 and the Fender Electric Instrument Co. the following year, he carried on using K&F nameplates until they were gone. Employees were retained, too, including a recently demobbed Don Randall.

> "IF IT HADN'T BEEN FOR DOC KIND OF PUSHING ME INTO IT, I PROBABLY WOULDN'T HAVE GOTTEN INTO THE GUITAR BUSINESS" LEO FENDER

LIFE AFTER LEO

Fender historian Richard Smith reveals Doc "considered himself an inventor, not a businessman". After leaving K&F, he returned to building guitars and doing instrument maintenance from a workshop at his family home. Doc also received some money from an inheritance in Kansas and during the 1950s, he opened a small machine shop turning out aircraft parts. He played professionally, too, working with big bands and orchestras. According to his son Kenneth, Doc even played with the Radio Station Orchestra alongside Jack Benny. He carried on gigging almost to the end of his life, playing popular songs from the 1930s with home-made guitars and amps.

Doc's daughter Maxine describes Doc as "a folk hero to a lot of guitarists of all ages. They were devoted to him". Richard Smith knew Doc well and describes him as "a real, real nice guy, and he was a fine musician". Others describe him as kind and funny. Later in life, Doc asked Leo what he would have ended up doing if they had never met. Leo replied: "Well, I'd probably have maybe two or three radio stores or TV repair shops." Leo also told Robb Lawrence: "If it hadn't been for Doc kind of pushing me into it, I probably wouldn't have gotten into the guitar business."

Had Doc stuck it out with Leo, he could have become a very wealthy man, but his son Kenneth told *The Orange County Register*: "There were no hard feelings on dad's part, they were still friends. Leo would visit dad and they would reminisce."

This is quite something, considering very few people ever claimed to have been a friend of Leo's. More extraordinary still, Doc actually listed Leo as next of kin after his children in his will and the two men remained close right up until Doc's death in 1990, aged 89.

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THE REVERB TOP 10

VINTAGE MODULATION PEDALS

In our latest rundown of the most popular pedals on Reverb.com, Dan Orkin picks out the best-selling modulation units on the online marketplace. Head this way for flangers, phasers, choruses and more...

1 Boss CE-2 Chorus
If chorus is the definitive 80s effect, the Boss CE-2 is the definitive 80s pedal. This chorus was used on so many classic records in that decade that it'd be quicker to list the hits you can't hear it on. Today, Boss offers the CE-2W Waza Craft reissue, which includes a recreation of this classic modulation circuit with some extra goodies packed in.

2 MXR Phase 90
The single-knob Phase 90 is a fixture in the Hall Of Fame of all-time-classic guitar effects. Today, there are countless Phase 90 variants, including signature editions such as the Eddie Van Halen 'EVH' model. When it comes to vintage Phase 90s, most collectors distinguish between the earlier 'script' and later 'block' logo iterations. Typically, the 'script' version is considered the more desirable of the two.

3 Electro-Harmonix Small Stone Phase Shifter
The Small Stone Phase Shifter from EHX was made in a number of different iterations through the 70s and 80s. All versions feature the same basic control layout, with some variations in the components that affect its tone. In this, the model is similar to the era's Electro-Harmonix Big Muffs, but without quite as obsessive a fanbase scrutinising each and every detail of the various versions.

4 Boss CE-3 Chorus Ensemble
The CE-3's main differentiating feature from the CF-2 was the inclusion of stereo outputs. While there were some other circuit changes that impact its tone, an original CE-3 typically costs less than the more popular CE-2 – a great option for an early Boss Chorus on a budget.

5 Boss PH-2 Super Phaser
Boss's primary Phaser model in the 80s and into the 90s, the PH-2 offered more tone-shaping options than equivalents such as the Phase 90. It was eventually replaced by the PH-3, but plenty of players still opt for the PH-2, due to its analogue circuit.

6 Boss BF-2 Flanger
The BF-2 Flanger remained in production from 1980 until 2001, so consequently, there are a lot of them floating around the used market. This was Boss's primary Flanger, though the company later offered the rare HF-2 Hi-Band Flanger and a bass version of the BF-2, the BF-2B.

7 Ibanez CS9 Stereo Chorus
Ibanez's main chorus unit during the 80s, the CS9 came from the same series that yielded the classic TS9 Tube Screamer overdrive. The CS9 has a similar layout to Boss's CE-2 model, but with a slightly different and reportedly 'shinier' tonal flavour.

8 MXR Phase 100
The Phase 100 was the Phase 90's bigger sibling, adding a variable intensity knob to alter the shape of the phasing waveforms. Like the vintage Phase 90, there are both 'script' and 'block' logo variations to be found – again, the earlier 'script' examples cost more.

9 Boss CE-1 Chorus Ensemble
Before the CE-2, there was the pioneering CE-1, which predates Boss's iconic compact-pedal enclosure. This was the first chorus pedal ever built and took its circuit from the chorus section of the iconic Roland JC-120 Jazz Chorus amp.

10 Boss DC-2 Dimension C
A rare Boss pedal with mode-selection buttons instead of variable knobs, the sounds of the DC-2 are entirely preset. The appeal of this pedal has always been about the lush, yet subtle, textures. Earlier in 2018, Boss announced a reissue as part of its ever-expanding Waza Craft series.

Seen something you need to add to your pedalboard? Head to Reverb.com to search for a great deal

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MUSICMAN

MUSIC MAN VALENTINE TREMOLO

Maroon 5 guitarist James Valentine's signature model is now even more versatile, thanks to the addition of a vibrato bridge. Chris Vinnicombe heads in the direction of the bar...

Music Man unveiled its James Valentine signature model back in 2016 to almost universal acclaim, and the Nebraska-born guitarist's highly versatile squeeze was praised in these pages for its wealth of great tones and fantastic neck. Although the Valentine covered a lot of ground already, this latest 2018 iteration ups the ante with the addition of a vibrato bridge – good news if, like this writer, you regularly find yourself unconsciously reaching for a whammy bar that doesn't exist when playing hardtail guitars.

Aside from switching the bridge and adding attractive new finish options, the Valentine Tremolo preserves everything that we loved about the original model: the roasted, figured-maple neck is finished with a blend of wax and gunstock oil (here, the timber is a lovely birdseye section, oven-baked to a rich caramel hue) while the snug, wedge-shaped ash body sits somewhere between a double-cut Junior and a Telecaster, and tapers from around 41mm on the treble side to 35.5mm on the bass side.

There's also the wiring, which unleashes a huge array of tones from the staggered-pole single-coil bridge pickup and chrome-covered neck humbucker, both mounted in Music Man's recessed pickup rings that allow for height and tilt adjustment. Although the pickup selector switch is just a three-way, both volume and tone controls are push/push, unlocking coil-split (tone) and gain boost (volume) options, the level of which can be adjusted, along with the guitar's hum-reducing Silent Circuit, via internal trim pots.

IN USE

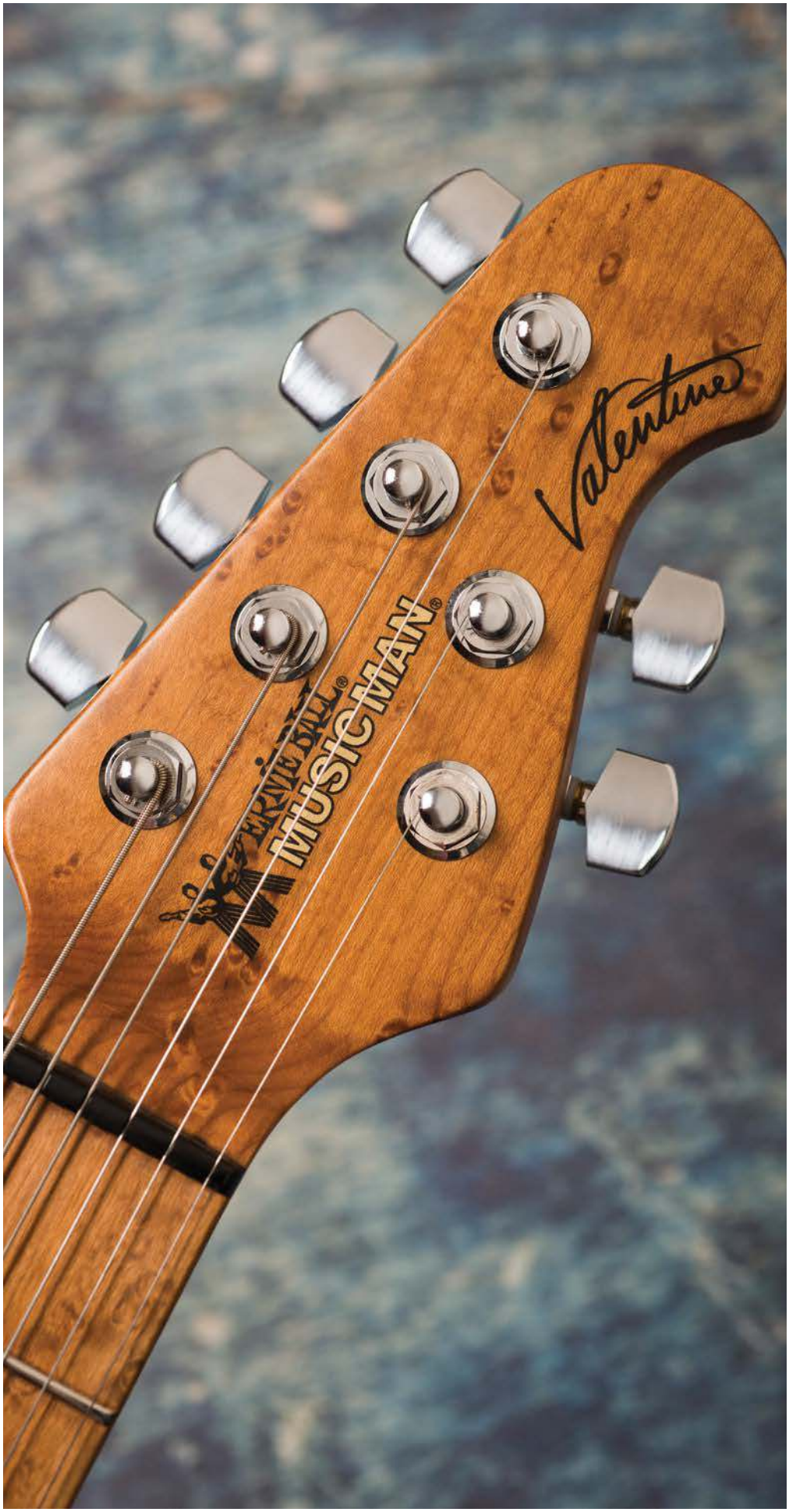
The Valentine's impressive acoustic resonance and sustain translates to a similarly excellent electrified performance. Whether your poison is pop, funk, soul, Americana, rock 'n' roll, experimental indie-rock – or you need to approximate all of the above during the course of a function-band gig – this guitar has you covered.

THE IMPRESSIVE ACOUSTIC RESONANCE AND SUSTAIN TRANSLATES TO AN EXCELLENT ELECTRIFIED PERFORMANCE

Maroon 5 guitarist Valentine wanted his signature instrument to combine the neck-pickup tones of his Gibson semis with Tele-like sounds

LIKE THIS? TRY THESE...

Music Man's **St Vincent** model (**£2,229**) was co-designed by Annie Clark and features an innovative aesthetic. The **PRS DGT** (**£3,149**) combines vintage-style humbucker tones with a vibrato bridge thanks to a collaboration between Paul Reed Smith and David Grissom. **Asher**'s **Marc Ford** signature model (**£3,799**) melds LP Special and Strat influences and features an 11-position ToneStyler switch



at the bridge, but there's no doubt that the Modern Tremolo vibrato unit and its bent-steel saddles bring a little more Strat-like flamboyance to the table, particularly when you push the tone control to activate the neck humbucker's coil split and let those Jimi-isms take over. With the split engaged there's a slight uplift in hiss but, thanks to the Silent Circuit, there's nothing like the buzz we experience when A/Bing the Valentine with vintage-style Strat pickups.

Wide open, the bridge pickup has a muscular twang and delivers a nicely vocal lead tone. Rich in harmonics, it's definitely not thin and it's comparable in level to the monstrous 10k Monty's Broadcaster-style bridge pickup fitted to our own parts T-style. Knocking the tone control back a little delivers more of a pseudo-humbucker sound for classic-rock riffs, while the volume control retains brightness as it's rolled back and the guitar's voice cleans up and morphs into a hollowed-out jangle.

Flip the pickup selector switch to the middle and the push/push tone pot gives you access to two very different sounds. With both coils of the neck activated, it's thicker and bluesier, making you want to really dig in and play lead. When the humbucker is split so that only the outer screw coil is active, there's much more zing and chime, with an almost Gretsch-y jangle that just demands that you strum chords. It might be James Valentine's guitar, but Johnny Marr lives here, too.

As previously discussed, the coil-split neck pickup tone can get infectiously Stratocaster-like, but flipping to the full neck 'bucker mode feels like swapping springs for hydraulics, and introduces a much smoother flavour, akin to the Gibson and Collings semi-hollow tones that Valentine loves.

Everyone has their own mental snapshot of what a great ES-335 tone is, of course – and it rather depends on the records, players and eras you gravitate towards – but there's certainly a nice mixture of cream and clarity here reminiscent of Gibson thinlines. There's even a jazz-club smokiness when you roll back the tone a little, play with fingers and throw in a few Wes Montgomery-inspired octaves. Not half bad for a solid ash bolt-on!

Telecaster, Strat, ES-335… that's almost everything you need to cover the whole history of popular music, right? Well, not quite, but the Valentine certainly provides a huge palette of tones to paint with.

From the mind of Ryan Adams comes a new guitar utility with more tricks up its sleeve than a 1980s supervillain. The DEFCON4 works as a preamp and EQ to meticulously craft your guitar's sound. Bring peace time to your tone and avoid tedious amp tweaking during a set by using the DEFCON4 to easily switch from single coil to humbucking instruments with a quick twist of the rotary knobs. When the Launch switch is engaged, go into DEFCON 1 and activate a searing boost for your guitar.

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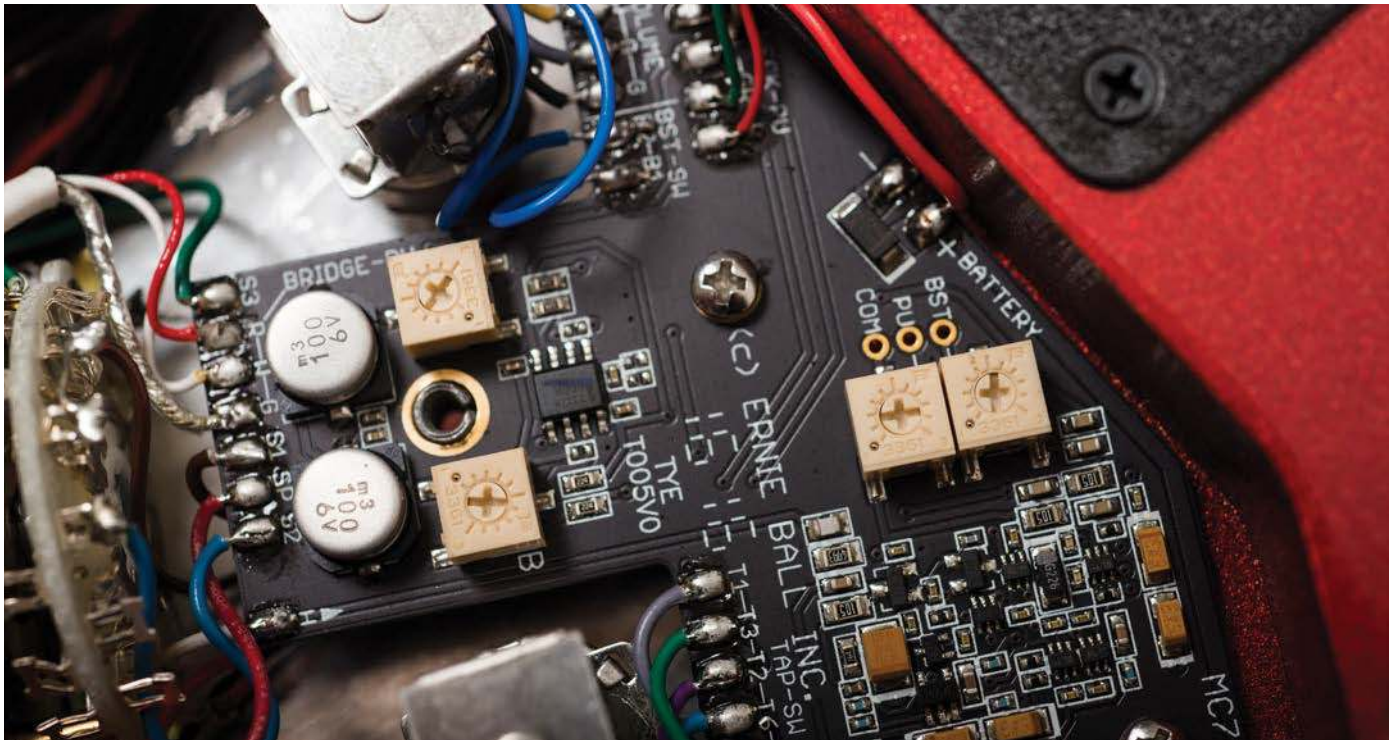

KEY FEATURES

Music Man Valentine Tremolo

- **PRICE** £2,649 (inc hard case)
- **DESCRIPTION** Solidbody double-cutaway electric guitar. Made in USA
- **BUILD** Ash body, roasted figured-maple neck with 10" fingerboard radius and 22 high-profile, medium-width stainless-steel frets, compensated nut
- **HARDWARE** Music Man Modern Classic Tremolo vibrato bridge with bent-steel saddles and push-in arm, Schaller locking tuners
- **ELECTRICS** Custom Music Man active preamp with Silent Circuit (requires 9V battery, supplied), push/push volume for gain boost, 500k push/push passive tone with .022µF tone capacitor, 3-way blade pickup selector, custom-wound staggered pole-piece single coil (bridge) and humbucker (neck) with chrome covers
- **LEFT-HANDERS** No
- **SCALE LENGTH** 25.5"/648mm
- **NECK WIDTH** 41.3mm at nut, 51.3mm at 12th fret
- **NECK DEPTH** 19.3mm at first fret, 21.5mm at 12th fret
- **STRING SPACING** 33.5mm at nut, 53.3mm at bridge
- **WEIGHT** 7.3lb/3.3kg
- **FINISH** Husker Red (as reviewed), Saturn Gold, Toluca Lake Blue, Trans Buttermilk (all high-gloss polyester), Satin Natural (satin polyester)
- **CONTACT** Strings & Things **stringsandthings.co.uk** **music-man.com**

It also tips its hat to the guitars that influenced its design without feeling backward-looking or limiting the player to an old-school approach.

On top of all that, the tweakable onboard boost can be set to heat things up considerably, to the point where it might make your stompbox solo boost redundant. And the little things really make a difference in a performance scenario, such as the fact that the push/push pots are easier to engage quickly than the average push/pull pot.

As you might expect from a high-end instrument from the Ernie Ball Music Man stable, the Modern Classic Tremolo bridge performs smoothly and superbly. Designed for downward travel only, whether you are dipping or diving, it returns to pitch with impressive accuracy.

On paper, the depth of the rounded C-shaped neck is a little skinnier than we'd usually prefer, but it's undeniable that Music Man knows a thing or two about carving and finishing a bolt-on neck. The combination of the drag-free, organic feel of that sumptuous wax and oil blend and the expertly rolled 'board edges and fret ends makes for a very friendly feel. Overall, it feels more like a guitar that's spent time on the bench of an experienced tech than one that's come straight out of a shipping box.

TELECASTER, STRAT, ES-335... THE VALENTINE CERTAINLY PROVIDES A HUGE PALETTE OF TONES TO PAINT WITH

Many artist collaborations offer little more than a fancy finish and a signature decal on a peghead, but Music Man's relationship with James Valentine has delivered so much more. Our review model arrived a month too late to be in the running for our 2018 Gear Of The Year Awards, but if you are looking for a do-it-all guitar with a great neck, bulletproof tuning stability, and pro-level mod cons that make life easier on the road, this is it.

VERDICT

+ Simple controls make accessing a variety of great tones easy
+ Svelte and luxurious neck
+ Smooth vibrato with no tuning woes

– Compact dimensions might not suit taller players

One of the best new electric-guitar designs of recent years just got better – a Valentine that you can enjoy 365 days a year…

9/10

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Rivolta GUITARS

BY · DENNIS · FANO

Rivolta Guitars is the latest creation from acclaimed guitar builder & designer Dennis Fano. New models Mondata, Mondata Junior and Combinata Junior due in soon. Combinata and Combinata Deluxe in stock.

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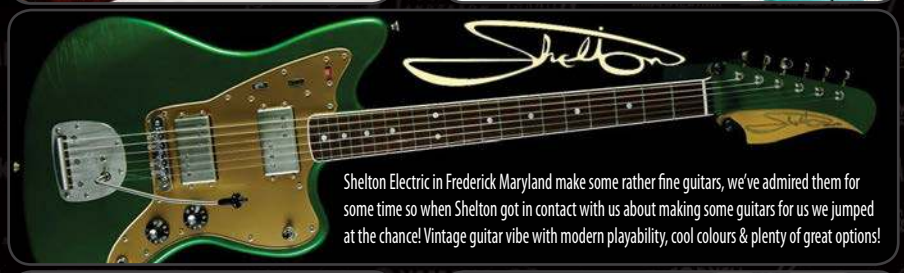

Shelton

Shelton Electric in Frederick Maryland make some rather fine guitars, we've admired them for some time so when Shelton got in contact with us about making some guitars for us we jumped at the chance! Vintage guitar vibe with modern playability, cool colours & plenty of great options!

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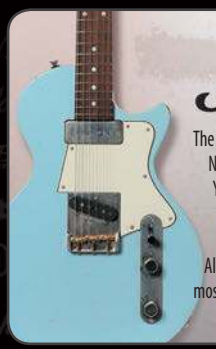

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Novo GUITARS

BY · DENNIS · FANO

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HÖFNER
VERYTHIN CT AND CLASSIC

Many players will remember their vintage Höfner Verithins fondly, but the new Verythin models offer classic looks together with concessions to modern player needs. Huw Price slims down…

Höfner was a long-established maker of fancy jazz-box guitars before rock 'n' roll even came along. Inevitably, however, the German company soon had to respond to the increasing popularity of American-made electric guitars young musicians were so enamoured with, and the Verithin was introduced in 1960 to emulate the ES-335.

The key difference, however was in the name – because at 1.25 inches deep, the Verithin was very thin indeed. The name may have been slightly altered, but the Verythin guitars reviewed here have the same body dimensions as the originals, along with a host of new features.

VERYTHIN CT

Now manufactured in China rather than Germany and coming from Höfner's Contemporary Series, the CT looks and feels not unlike a vintage Verithin. The headstock shape, striped fingerboard inlays, and rectangular pearl tuner buttons all look the part. We're less enamoured with the headstock inlays, but the knobs and pickguard shape add to this affordable thinline semi's vintage aesthetic.

While by no means a deal-breaker, the thick poly gloss finish (with noticeable build-up around the neck join) and the slightly scruffy dress of the tall jumbo frets betray its mass-produced, budget origins. At this price, however, some build and finish inconsistencies are to be expected.

VERYTHIN CLASSIC

Höfner enthusiasts may conclude that 'Classic' is a misnomer, because this guitar has relatively little in common with the Verithin models of the 1960s. Besides the body outline, laminated spruce top and the 'lyre' tailpiece, this is a substantially different instrument.

THE VERYTHINS HERE HAVE THE SAME BODY DIMENSIONS AS THE ORIGINALS, ALONG WITH A HOST OF NEW FEATURES

Fiddleback maple grain pattern can be seen all over the body through the transparent cherry finish and inside, there's a centre-block to enhance sustain while reducing feedback. Stop tailpieces weren't a period feature, but many players will prefer this one to the earlier trapeze-style tailpiece.

Little information is provided about the pickups, besides the fact that they're 'full sized' Höfner humbuckers. They combine with the tune-o-matic bridge, three-way switch and conventional control layout to make the CT an attractive hybrid of Höfner style and ES-335 practicality.

The soundhole and headstock shapes are changed on this German-made guitar, but more significantly, there's a very wide solid-spruce centre block running through the body. Since the Verithin was an attempt to emulate the ES-335, it's probably something Höfner should have done in the first place, but better late than never…

All the hardware is updated, too, with modern mass-produced gold-plated items. The tune-o-matic bridge is fair enough, since it's not too dissimilar to Höfner's 60s design, but the knobs and Schaller tuners are

KEY FEATURES

Verythin CT

- **PRICE** £622
- **DESCRIPTION** Semi-acoustic six-string electric guitar. Made in China
- **BUILD** Bound maple-ply body, set medium-depth C profile neck, bound rosewood fingerboard with stripe markers and 22 jumbo frets
- **HARDWARE** Die-cast tuners, tune-o-matic bridge, stop tailpiece
- **ELECTRICS** Two Höfner humbucking pickups
- **CONTROLS** Individual volume and tone controls, three-way switch
- **LEFT-HANDERS** No
- **FINISHES** Red (as reviewed), sunburst, black
- **SCALE LENGTH** 628mm/24.7"
- **NECK WIDTH** 44mm at nut, 53mm at 12th fret
- **NECK DEPTH** 21mm at first fret, 23mm at 12th fret
- **STRING SPACING** 34.5mm at nut, 51.5mm at bridge
- **WEIGHT** 6.7lb/3.07kg
- **CONTACT** Forsyth Brothers Ltd **forsyths.co.uk** **www.hofner-guitars.com**

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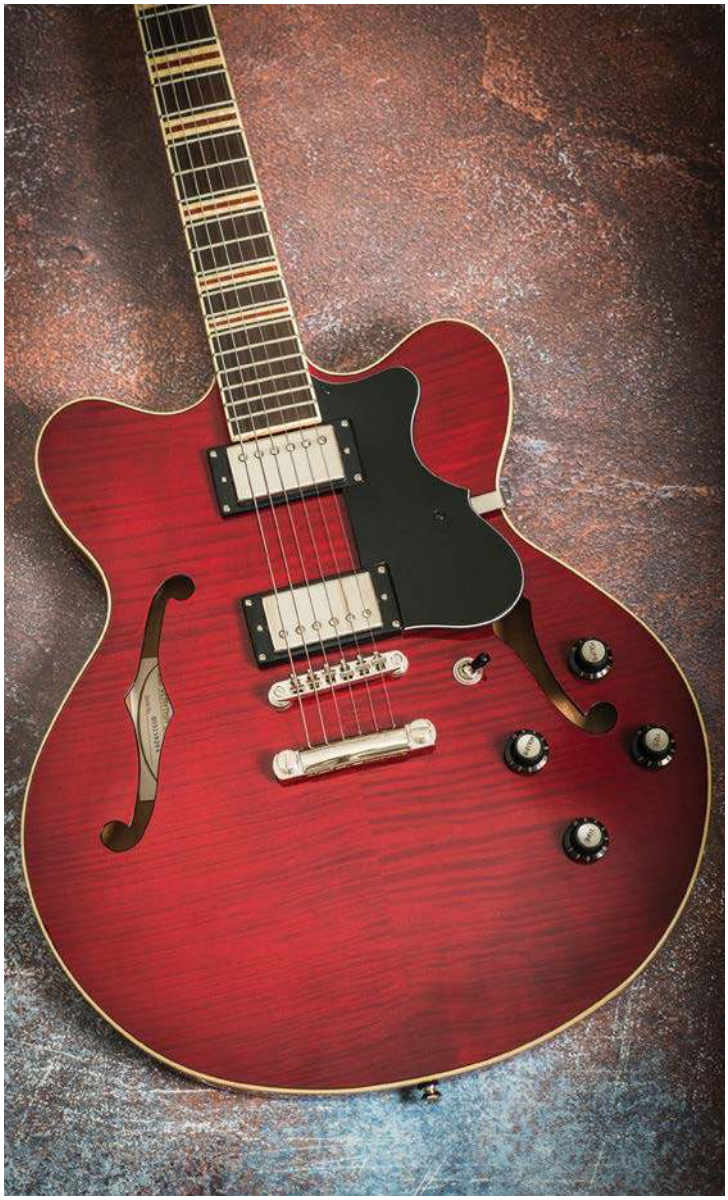

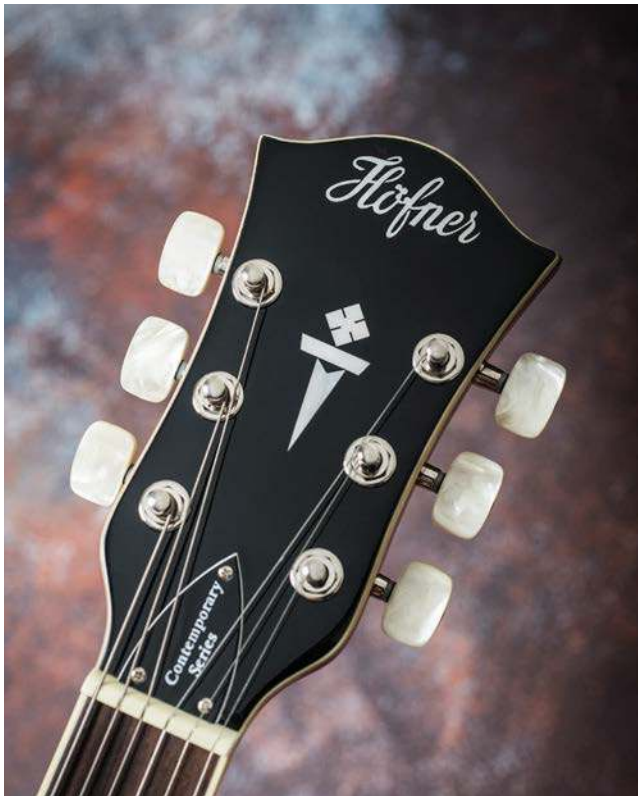

rather blandly functional and detract from this model's character.

Gone, too, are the single-coil pickups with the diamond Höfner logo stamped in the cover. Instead, we have an uncovered set of Bavarian-made NOwaxx humbuckers, with conventional surrounds. The most striking difference between these guitars, however, is the neck set. The Classic's has a steeper angle, which results in the bridge being adjusted unusually high. We measure about 12.5mm from the body to the base of the bridge, which is double that of the standard CT.

The wood does look very attractive under a thin and well applied gloss finish. In true Höfner style, the best is saved for the back and sides, where the outer layer of the laminate is flamey fiddleback maple. Overall, the finish quality impresses – with the exception of the fret dressing.

The fret ends are extremely rounded, which is fine. But in the process, the file has scuffed up the finish and the binding, leaving it feeling almost as rough as it looks.

IN USE

There's little to choose between these two in weight or feel, but the Classic has a slightly fuller and more comfortable neck. Acoustically, the sonic contrast is greater, with the CT having the darker and more subdued tone of a typical semi-solid, while the Classic is louder, brighter and more dynamic. Impressive sustain is a shared characteristic.

THE CT HAS THE DARKER AND MORE SUBDUED TONE, WHILE THE CLASSIC IS LOUDER, BRIGHTER AND MORE DYNAMIC

The CT's pickups provide some pleasant surprises. They have something of a classic voicing, in a 'Pat. No' sort of way, with good articulation, strong mids and moderate power. Played clean, you get a nasal quack off the bridge and a more rounded and vocal tone from the neck. This eases into a thick, clear and slightly aggressive voicing as the amp is turned up. In other words, it's a very creditable ES-335-type guitar.

The Classic's humbuckers produce bright and clear tones with impressive definition. Compared to the CT's pickups, there's a touch more sweetness and refinement, but the NOwaxx units don't have quite as much character. They greatly impress for clean and semi-driven

LIKE THIS? TRY THESE...

The world is certainly not short of reasonably priced semis, and CT alternatives include the **Epiphone Sheraton-II Pro** (£519), **Hagstrom Super Viking** (£681) and the **Gretsch G5622T Electromatic** (£700). The Classic also finds itself duking it out with some big names, not least **Gibson**'s 2019 **ES-335 Dot** (£2,399) and the **Gretsch G6609TG Players Edition Broadkaster Double-Cut** (£2,379)

KEY FEATURES

Verythin Classic

- **PRICE** £2,520
- **DESCRIPTION** Semi-acoustic six-string electric guitar. Made in Germany
- **BUILD** Bound maple-ply body, set medium-depth C-profile flame-maple neck, bound ebony fingerboard with dot markers and 22 jumbo frets
- **HARDWARE** Schaller die-cast tuners, tune-o-matic bridge, 'lyre' tailpiece
- **ELECTRICS** 2x Höfner NOwaxx humbucking pickups
- **CONTROLS** Individual volume and tone controls, three-way switch
- **LEFT-HANDERS** No
- **FINISHES** Clear gloss
- **SCALE LENGTH** 628mm/24.7"
- **NECK WIDTH** 43.5mm at nut, 53.5mm at 12th fret
- **NECK DEPTH** 22mm at first fret, 24mm at 12th fret
- **STRING SPACING** 34.75mm at nut, 51.5mm at bridge
- **WEIGHT** 6.9lb/3.13kg

jangly tones and chord inversions cut through with authority when overdrive and distortion are involved. The fast attack-and-release characteristic makes the Classic less smooth than the CT, but it's even better for rhythm and picked-chord work as a result.

Most heritage guitar manufacturers have to balance the fondness some players feel for vintage instruments with the need to remain relevant and expand into new markets. With respect to Höfner fans, despite its considerable charm, the original Verithin was very much an instrument of its era. During the 1960s, most serious players upgraded to American models as soon as they could afford to – for a reason.

In order to make the Verythin Classic suitable for contemporary players, Höfner has made some bold and sensible changes. It's an attractive and well-made instrument – besides the fret-dress issues – but it's also a bit charmless and uninspiring. Having solved the playability and feedback issues, and cleaned up the basic styling, it seems like a last-minute decision was made to throw on a bunch of industry-standard parts in a misjudged attempt to modernise.

The end result is a guitar that is neither classic nor contemporary – especially when you consider the boldness, care and understanding of company tradition that goes into designing similarly priced modern Gretsch and Gibson models.

The Verythin Classic lacks the 'X-factor' that would inspire us to buy one at this price, but it plays well and has slightly better tone than the significantly cheaper CT. On the other hand, hardware and pickups can easily be upgraded, and if combining vintage Höfner vibe with classic ES-335 tone and playing feel appeals to you, then the CT is a very attractive and affordable semi-hollow electric alternative.

The Guitar Magazine VERDICT

VERYTHIN CT

+ Cool retro looks
+ Decent playability and tone
+ Very affordable

– Bumpy jumbo frets

A decently made centre-block semi with classic Höfner looks, enjoyable ES-335-type tones and easy playability

8/10

The Guitar Magazine VERDICT

VERYTHIN CLASSIC

+ Impressive materials and finish
+ Good feedback resistance

– Quite expensive
– Poor fret dress

A mostly well built but ultimately uninspiring attempt to update the classic Verithin concept for the modern player

6/10

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FAITH
NEXUS SERIES NEPTUNE & VENUS CUTAWAY ELECTROS

This pair of new Indonesian-built Faiths from the company's mid-price Nexus Series boast exotic solid woods and plugged-in performance. Michael Watts enjoys the music of the spheres…

For over 15 years now, Faith Guitars has provided working musicians with reliable, intriguing acoustic-guitar models that veer away from traditional designs. As the company's design guru Patrick James Eggle says, a Faith guitar should be "as visually effective when silent as it would be sonically when in the hands of a skilled musician".

Both the Neptune and Venus models have won The UK's Best Acoustic Guitar at the MIA music awards in different iterations, so there is definitely proof of concept, and this new Nexus series sits squarely in the lower-to-middle bracket of the Faith range. With their all-solid mahogany construction and unfussy appointments, the only 'flash' in evidence is Faith's 'F' logo, inlaid at the 12th fret.

Recent socio-political developments, both at home and abroad, have had a direct effect on the guitar-buying market, with the result that it's not unusual to find a price hike of around 25 per cent on instruments from all around the world. As such, guitarists have had to adjust their expectations when it comes to buying new guitars across all price points.

There are other pressures being exerted on manufacturers, too. First, let's have a look at the mahogany. These days, a good set of Cuban or Honduran mahogany will cost around the same as one of these guitars. What we're dealing with here in actual fact is not Swietenia Macrophylla but Toona Sureni – or Indonesian mahogany – a cousin of the fabled traditional tonewood. As genuine mahogany becomes increasingly scarce, guitarists are becoming accustomed to seeing woods such as sapele and khaya used in its place. We welcome the adoption of alternative, ethically sourced timbers and Faith Guitars takes pride in only using sustainable woods from FSC-certified sources.

Another indication of the way the market is moving is that even at over £600, neither instrument comes with a case. Up until recently, it would not have been unreasonable to expect at the very least a gigbag of some sort to be included in the price.

HANDS ON

Based on Patrick James Eggle's Saluda model, Faith describes the Neptune as a 'baby jumbo', which makes sense, given its curvaceous shape and 16-inch lower bout. Of the two guitars on review here, the Neptune is the cheaper, no doubt due in part to its simpler electronics and the lack of cutaway. Yet with its beautiful Copper Black transparent finish and gently figured Macassar ebony fingerboard and bridge, it certainly doesn't look like a budget instrument in any way.

When played both seated and standing, the guitar remains comfortable, although it may prove a little bulky for the smaller player. The neck fills the hand nicely all the way to the 14th-fret body join, but we find the 43mm (1.69-inch) nut width to be a little cramped for fingerstyle playing. The action could also use a tweak, as it is higher than we'd have liked. This isn't unusual with a new

KEY FEATURES

Faith Nexus Neptune Electro Copper Black

- **PRICE** £619
- **DESCRIPTION** Solid-wood electro-acoustic small jumbo. Made in Indonesia
- **BUILD** Solid Indonesian mahogany back, sides and neck. Macassar ebony fingerboard
- **HARDWARE** Faith Precision closed tuners, black
- **ELECTRICS** Fishman Sonicore pickup and Sonitone preamp
- **SCALE LENGTH** 25.59"
- **NECK WIDTH** 43mm at nut, 55mm at 12th fret
- **NECK DEPTH** 22mm at 1st fret, 28mm at 9th fret
- **STRING SPACING** 34mm at nut, 53mm at bridge
- **WEIGHT** 4.3lb/1.95kg
- **FINISH** Copper Black, gloss

KEY FEATURES

Faith Nexus Venus Cut Electro Cognac

- **PRICE** £649
- **DESCRIPTION** Solid-wood electro-acoustic OM. Made in Indonesia
- **BUILD** Solid Indonesian mahogany back, sides and neck. Macassar ebony fingerboard
- **HARDWARE** Faith Precision closed tuners, black
- **ELECTRICS** Fishman Sonicore pickup and Isys+ preamp
- **SCALE LENGTH** 25.39"
- **NECK WIDTH** 43mm at nut, 52mm at 12th fret
- **NECK DEPTH** 22mm at 1st fret, 28mm at 9th fret
- **STRING SPACING** 36mm at nut, 56mm at bridge
- **WEIGHT** 3.8lb/1.72kg
- **FINISH** Cognac, gloss
- **CONTACT** Barnes & Mullins **www.bandm.co.uk** **www.faithguitars.com**

LIKE THIS? TRY THESE...

For an all-mahogany electro OM, check out the **Sigma S000M-15E (£579)** and for a stage-ready black jumbo with a cutaway, the **Yamaha CPX700II BL (£569)** should be on your radar, too

instrument and can be adjusted to taste by your dealer.

Sonically, this guitar does have some of the characteristics you might expect from an all-mahogany instrument such as the prominent midrange and pure, fundamental quality to the note. However, there's less of the velvet-smooth treble and dry, woody bass of a truly great mahogany instrument. However, when played with a pick, the guitar wakes up and a pleasing growly low end emerges – great for blues.

This acoustic timbre translates into a punchy piezo sound when plugged in, and the soundhole-mounted electronics of the active Fishman system, though relatively unsophisticated, do allow for a degree of control over your tone. As with all such systems, however, there's a 'plastic' quality to the sound which is inherent to their nature. While this may not be an issue when playing in a band, it is thrown into sharp relief in a solo fingerstyle or singer-songwriter context.

The Nexus Venus also looks the part, with a very striking Cognac finish that contrasts very nicely with the dark grain filler beneath. The colour contrast also serves to pick out the black tuners and equally black NuBone nut and saddle. One minor drawback with both guitars is that the finish is so shiny, reflections sometimes make it difficult to see the small side-marker dots.

The smaller OM-style body of the Venus makes it a pleasure to hold, but sadly, also serves to compromise the bass response we find in the Neptune. While the acoustic performance may be somewhat muted when compared to its larger sister, the electronics in the Venus feature a shoulder-mounted Fishman preamp with a built-in tuner, as well tone controls and a phase switch.

WHEN PLAYED WITH A PICK, THE NEPTUNE WAKES UP AND A PLEASING GROWLY LOW END EMERGES – GREAT FOR BLUES

These additions, and the cutaway, make the Venus a serious contender for a stage performer shopping at this price point. Once again, the narrow nut width aims it more at strummers and flatpickers than fingerstyle players. Intonation is good on both the Venus and the Neptune thanks to a slightly wider and well-sculpted saddle, so you can make the most of the 14-fret neck and, in the case of the Venus, the Venetian cutaway.

There's a lot to like when it comes to playability of both models and what the Venus may lack in acoustic punch, it makes up for when it comes to plugged-in performance. Both instruments certainly live up to expectations concerning fit and finish at this price point, too. Faith Guitars is working hard when it comes to sustainable wood sources and ethical treatment of its workforce and to us, these considerations are worth paying that little bit extra for.

The Guitar Magazine VERDICT

Nexus Neptune Electro Copper Black

+ Unusual, ethically sourced woods
+ Good strummed bass response
– Slightly restrictive nut width for fingerstyle players
– Not even a gigbag, for over £600?

A well-made, good-looking small jumbo with plugged-in performance to match

7/10

The Guitar Magazine VERDICT

Nexus Venus Cut Electro Cognac

+ Once again, laudable ethical build and material sourcing
+ Comfortable to play
+ Strong plugged-in performance
– Acoustically timid
– No case

A strong contender in the stage-ready, all-solid wood OM category

7/10

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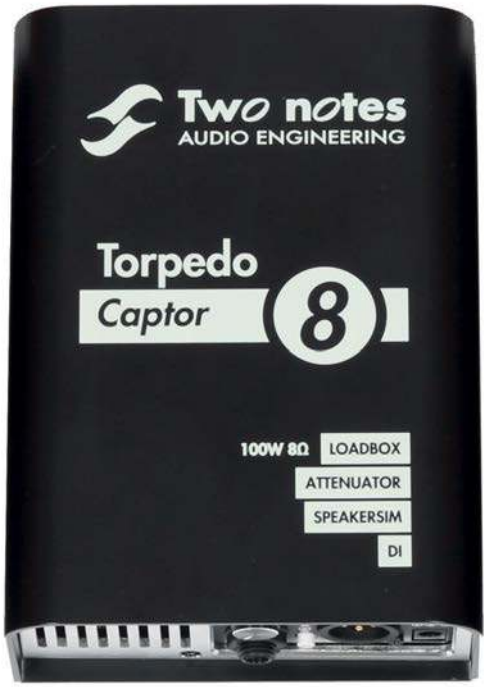
Captor 4

Captor 16



Captor 8

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1696RT BLACK MAGICK REVERB

Lenny Kravitz is not known as an amp designer, but he helped Supro with this reverbed-up recreation of Jimmy Page's legendary studio favourite. Huw Price finds out how the magick happens...

If it wasn't for the fact that they remain one of Jimmy Page's most mythologised studio weapons with Led Zeppelin, it's likely that vintage Supro amps would be regarded more with fondness than the reverence they are today. That said, nobody knows for sure which model or models Page was using on those first two Led Zep albums, which leaves those wanting to nail that elusive overdrive sound in something of a bind.

Albert Lee says that he and Page bought their Supro amps in 1961 from Selmer's, and it's known that Page's amp had a 12-inch speaker. It's been suggested that he had it converted from its original 2x10 format, and debate rages about whether Page's amp was equipped with 6L6 or 6973 power valves.

Into all this wades the 1696RT Black Magick Reverb (its reverb-less sibling was released back in 2016), which is based on the 6973-loaded Supro that Page acquired in 1974 and later loaned to the Rock And Roll Hall Of Fame museum. Not exactly the right era, perhaps, but a good indicator of the sort of Supro amps he was into during his Zeppelin days.

THE BLACK MAGICK REVERB IS BASED ON A 6973-LOADED SUPRO THAT JIMMY PAGE ACQUIRED IN 1974

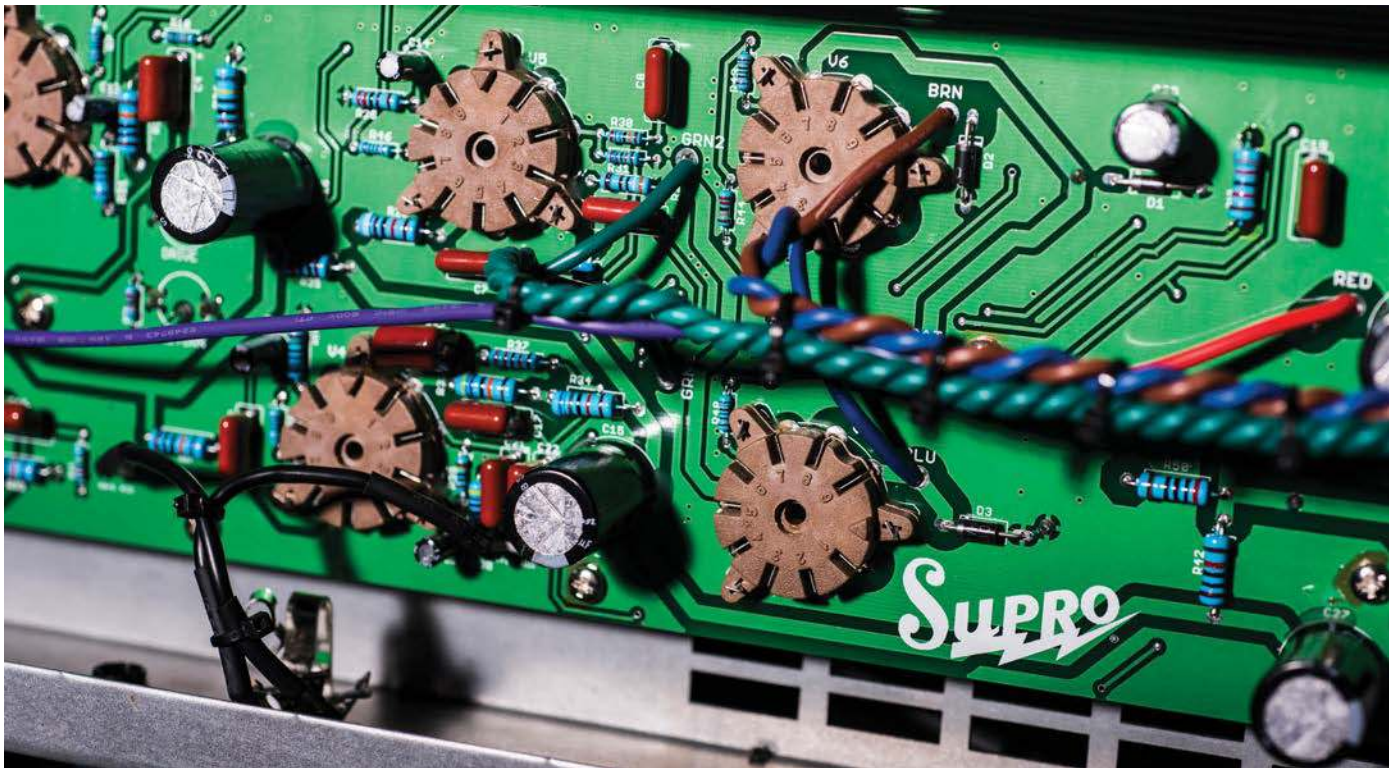
As you can probably guess, this version of the Black Magick has an added spring reverb and separate treble and bass controls. Rated at 25 watts, the Class-A power stage is cathode biased and coupled with a custom-made BD12 speaker.

More commonly used in hi-fi and jukebox amps, 6973 valves look like EL84s, but are quite different. They can handle a higher maximum plate voltage rating of around 440 volts and have different pin-out and bias requirements. *TGM*'s Dave Hunter has retrofitted 6973s in an EL84 amp and says they sound "louder, chunkier, and bigger… with firmer lows and a meaty, if not overcooked, midrange".

The finish is excellent inside and out, with PCB construction keeping the cost below boutique levels. It's also available as a head and cab.

LIKE THIS? TRY THESE...

Other vintage Supro clones with 6973 valves are rare to non-existent, but try tracking down a **Magic Amplification Z1** – or build your own with a **Watts Tube Audio Model 24 kit** ($695). Pre-built Model 24s can sometimes be found on Reverb, too



IN USE

The Black Magick Reverb has a very distinctive tone that can be summarised as 'old-school heavy rock in a box'. Overdrive is smooth, yet thrillingly ferocious; it hangs on to single notes with Rottweiler-like tenacity and the defining tonal characteristic is a fat-and-forward midrange. At first, it may seem slightly lacking in treble and headroom, but if you're looking for a clear and clean pedal platform, this isn't it – and it isn't designed to be.

Nor is it particularly versatile, or blessed with wide-ranging tone controls or midrange sculpting. Swapping from a blackguard Tele replica to our recently completed Greco 'Goldtop' with P-90s, the differences we would expect to hear between them are not as apparent as they would usually be.

If you've ever researched Jimmy Page's tones, this may account for much of the daze and confusion out there. The key thing to grasp is that, with so much colouration going on, you have to accept this amp both for what it does and doesn't do.

The Black Magick gets louder and brighter simultaneously, but even so, the treble control remains maxed out with the bass set fairly low throughout our tests. It's not that it's dull sounding or lacking in clarity, but the airy treble frequencies of a Blackface or late-50s tweed circuit aren't on offer. Instead, the cleans are closer to the rounded mellowness of 50s Gibson amps.

With the amp's volume set high, the sound actually becomes brighter when you back off the guitar volume. If you're prepared to work those controls, you can explore a wide range of overdrive textures

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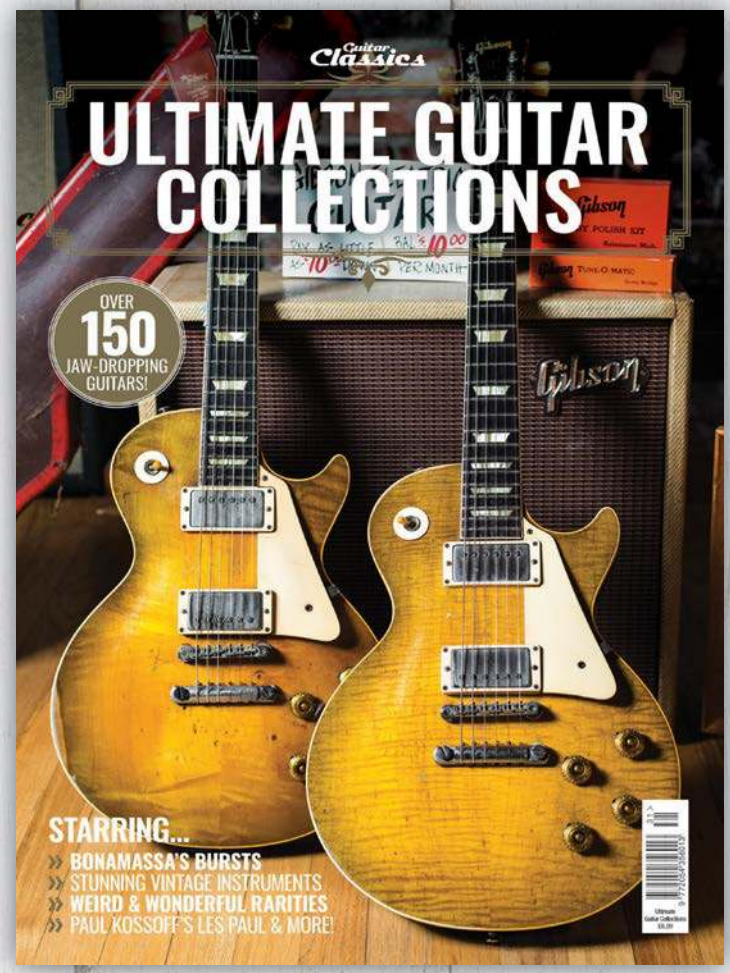

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KEY FEATURES

Supro 1696RT Black Magick Reverb

- **PRICE** £1,529
- **DESCRIPTION** Two-channel (with parallel link) cathode-biased valve combo with reverb and tremolo. Made in the USA
- **POWER RATING** 25W
- **VALVES** 4x 12AX7, 1x 12AT7, 2x 6973
- **CONTROL PANEL** Input 1+2, input 2, volume 1, volume 2, treble, bass, reverb, tremolo speed, tremolo depth, master volume, standby, power
- **REAR PANEL** 2x 4 ohm, 2x 8 ohm, 1x 16 ohm speaker outputs, reverb/tremolo footswitch socket
- **SPEAKER** Supro BD12 12" ceramic
- **DIMENSIONS** 520 x 476 x 222mm
- **WEIGHT** 39.5lb/18kg
- **CONTACT** JHS **jhs.co.uk** **suprousa.com**

and having less treble as overdrive increases ensures the Black Magick never becomes harsh or edgy.

You can also make subtle tonal adjustments by balancing the two volume controls when you're plugged into the 1+2 input. In addition to providing a touch more gain, volume 1 thickens the low mids, while volume 2 has more lift in the upper mids. If things get too loud, the master volume is pretty effective – but we think the smoothly compressed characteristics of the overdriven 6973 power valves are too good to miss. Instead, we prefer running the master volume flat out and using an attenuator.

The reverb tank is fed the same slightly dark signal, so it's a warm and lush effect, rather than splashy and surfy. The control works gradually to allow precise settings and we find that the dry signal remains distinct even with plenty of reverb in the mix.

The bias tremolo is similarly effective, with a wide-ranging speed control and plenty of depth. It's swampy rather than stuttery and remains playable even at its most intense. We even detect something resembling pitch-shifting harmonics when heavy and slow trem is combined with lots of reverb.

PLUG IN, CRANK IT UP AND BEFORE YOU KNOW IT, HOURS WILL HAVE PASSED AND YOUR EARS WILL BE RINGING

The onboard BD12 speaker is described as 'British voiced', which is up there with 'takes pedals well' in the lexicon of commonly used but often not tremendously informative guitar-related phrases. British guitar speakers have never conformed to a single tonal signature, so we decide to try the Black Magick Reverb through some other speakers to determine how the BD12 contributes to the overall sound.

It holds its own with a Fane A60, a Celestion Blue (attenuated to avoid damage) and a Celestion G12, and the stock speaker actually sounds the best of the bunch with this circuit. The BD12 offers the solid lows, forceful mids and the articulate attack of a fine ceramic: it's quite efficient and can't be accused of rolling off any treble. It also does justice to the rude and harmonically loaded honk of the Black Magick Reverb's overdrive.

The sense of instant gratification makes this a dangerous amplifier to use. Plug in, crank it up and, before you know it, hours will have passed. Your ears will be ringing and you'll be in no doubt that the teenager who thrilled to the sound of that first powerchord still lives on inside you. The 1696RT's tonal range may be limited but the fun certainly isn't. Throw in the vibey onboard effects and it's a tempting package.

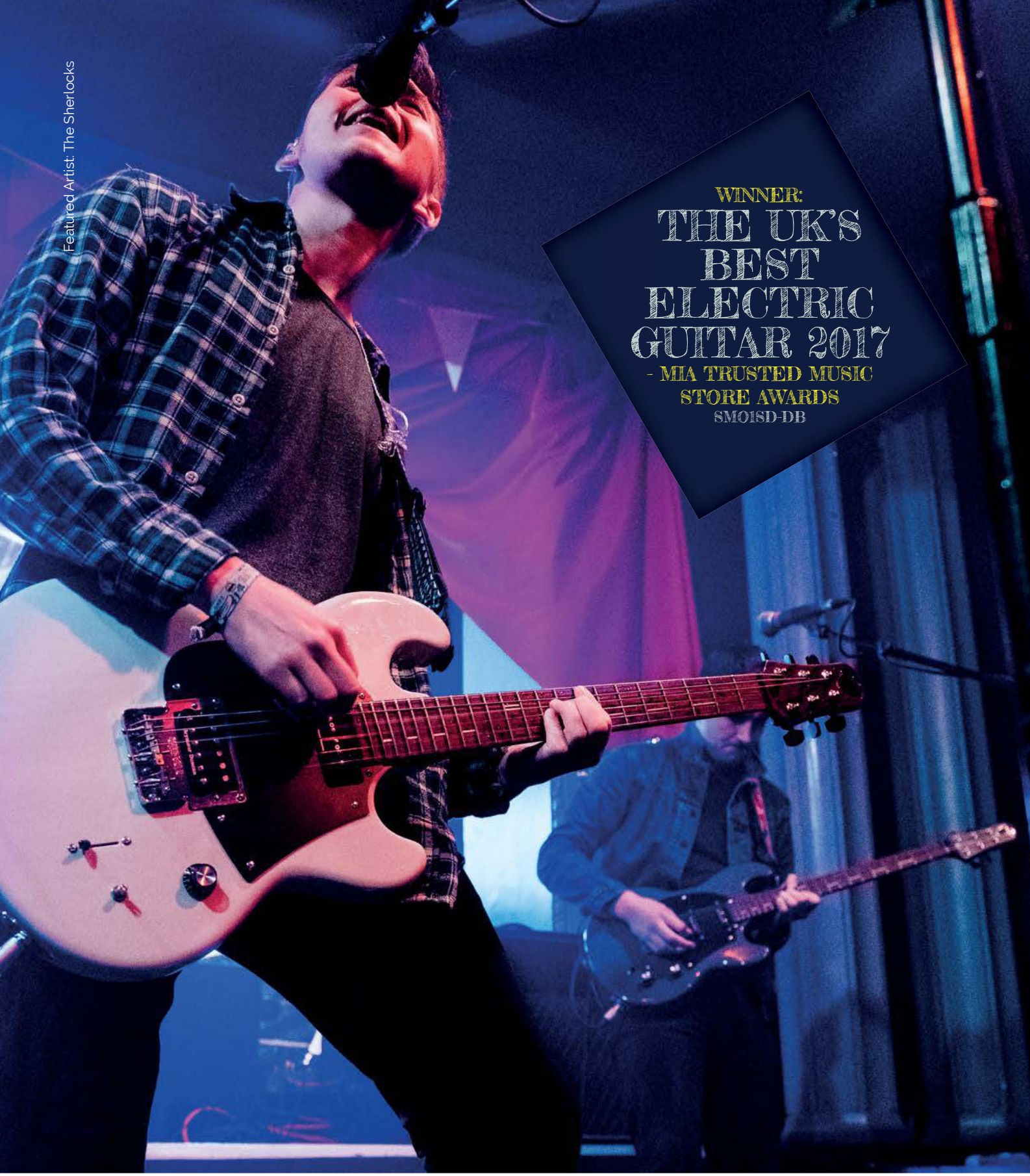
The Guitar Magazine VERDICT

+ Magnificent classic-rock tones
+ Warm cleans
+ Atmospheric onboard effects

− Limited treble and headroom
− It's not the most versatile

Inspiration beats versatility all day long, and for plug-in-and-play vintage rock tones with all the effects you really need, we can think of few better options

9/10



Designed in the UK by Patrick James Eggle, the all-new Shergold Masquerader makes a polite nod to its heritage and then boldly heads off in its own unique direction.

Made for those unafraid to be noticed, the SM01SD has a solid mahogany body, a beautiful solid rosewood neck and is loaded with genuine USA Seymour Duncan pickups.

ShergoldGuitars.com

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SYNERGY SYN-50

Could a 50-watt valve head with switchable preamps from boutique makers be the cure for 'too many amps' syndrome? Richard Purvis opens all the little boxes and gets hot-swapping...

There's something more than slightly disconcerting about taking delivery of an amplifier and finding it has two great big holes in the front panel. But this isn't IKEA's new self-assembly backline range: it's the return of modular amplification. And you know what? The idea makes a lot of sense.

If most of an amp's particular character comes from its front end, why not let guitarists swap preamps in and out, for radical revoicing within the same shell?

Synergy's modular tech is directly descended from the old Egnater/Randall system, and those old modules will actually work with the new amps… but there's one new factor that might just help the idea catch on properly this time.

As part of the Boutique Amps Distribution behemoth, Synergy has close ties (not to mention a large shared manufacturing facility) with the likes of Friedman and Morgan, and has therefore been able to call on its famous friends to design modules based on their own hugely acclaimed amps.

Our SYN-50 arrives with four of the 11 currently available preamps, any two of which can be slotted into the front panel and secured with a couple of thumbscrews. Each module has two channels, so the included four-way MIDI footswitch gives you four tones to hop between without even unscrewing anything.

The modules are all priced at £375; our review amp has two designed by Friedman (based on the Plexi-style BE100, with and without boost), one by Morgan (from the Vox-like AC20) and one with Synergy's own take on the Fender Twin Reverb and Deluxe Reverb. All of this is running through a pair of 6L6s into a ported 2x12 cab equipped with Celestion Vintage 30s.

SYNERGY HAS CALLED ON ITS FAMOUS FRIENDS TO DESIGN MODULES BASED ON THEIR OWN HUGELY ACCLAIMED AMPS

Now, you may well point out at this stage that there's more to a guitar amplifier than its preamp, and equally that there's more to a preamp than its circuit. So no, we can't expect a Friedman that's been squeezed onto a toastie-sized PCB and pushed through someone else's output stage to sound exactly the same as the hand-wired real deal. But oh my, are

we keen to find out just how close it can get…

IN USE

In its unloaded state, this head would make a lovely shelter for bats. But for review purposes, we'd better fill those openings with a couple of modules. The Morgan one pushes into the right-hand slot cleanly enough, and screwing it snugly to the panel takes seconds; but the Synergy T/DLX preamp needs a bit more of a shove to dock with the contacts in the left slot, and then one of the screws doesn't want to go all the way in. It's okay in the end, but it's not exactly slick – and neither is the process of loosening the screws, then tugging on them to take a module out.

Once we're in business, though, the SYN-50 looks and operates just like a standard channel-switching amp. And the first thing to say is that the Morgan AC20 sounds… well, an awful lot like a Morgan AC20. If you're after that Voxy squished attack and shimmery breakup, it's all here – and while we do miss the looseness of cathode-biased EL84s and low-wattage speakers, the difference is not as pronounced as you might expect. Cranking the master controls for presence and density helps – we're guessing these act on the negative feedback loop (treble and bass respectively), so leaving them wide open gives us some extra sizzle and bloom.

The two channels are voiced the same, and share a tonestack, so the only variety on offer from channel-switching within this module – other than the independent bright switches – is in the gain and channel volume settings. But this gives you plenty of options for those big solo boosts… and of course, if you really want to confuse the house engineer, you can just stomp over to the other module.

ONCE THE MODULE IS IN PLACE, THE SYN-50 LOOKS AND OPERATES JUST LIKE A STANDARD CHANNEL-SWITCHING AMP

The T/DLX unit offers a clear Atlantic-hopping contrast from its

15-WATT POWERHOUSE

MT 15
Mark Tremonti Signature Amp

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The MT 15

15 watts may not seem like much, but the MT 15 is a commanding two channel amp with balanced aggression and articulation. Powered by 6L6 tubes, it has a bold sound, so you can dig in heavy with rhythms but also get singing lead tones out of one amp. Whether recording, practicing, writing, or playing a small room, this amp has everything you need. The bulk of the rhythm and lead guitar tones on the album The Last Hero by Alter Bridge were recorded using the prototype of the MT 15.

PRS PAUL REED SMITH GUITARS

KEY FEATURES

Synergy SYN-50

- **PRICE** £1,599 (plus preamp modules)
- **DESCRIPTION** Valve head with switchable preamp modules. Made in the USA
- **POWER RATING** 50W
- **VALVES** 2x 6L6, 3x 12AX7 (plus 2x 12AX7 in each preamp module)
- **CONTROLS** Guitar input and channel switch; density, presence, master volume; standby and mains power switches, MIDI in and thru; 2x speaker outputs with 4/8/16 ohms impedance switch; balanced DI out with buttons for cab sim bypass, earth lift and -20dB; effects loop send and return with hi/lo level button (controls on modules vary between types)
- **DIMENSIONS** 641 x 254 x 254mm
- **WEIGHT** 42lb/19kg
- **OPTIONS** Synergy EXT speaker cabinet with 2x Celestion Vintage 30 speakers (as reviewed, £669), modules available from Deizel, Friedman, Metropoulos, Morgan, Soldano and Synergy (£375 each)
- **CONTACT** Boutique Amps Distribution **boutiqueamps distribution.com synergyamps.com**

Vox-voiced neighbour, and there's also a stark difference between its two channels. The Deluxe side offers beefy clean tones with lots of snap in the mids and classic Blackface sparkle on top, and you can push the gain for some beautifully sweet Fender crunch. You also have two teeny toggle switches, marked B and T (bright and tight), for added EQ tuning. The Twin channel has this feature as well but, while it does offer more headroom for pedals, it sounds a little bit flat in comparison and also seems to have a higher noisefloor at matched levels.

We've no such worries with the two Friedman preamps, which we can't resist lining up as a pair for four switchable channels of pure Plexi grind. There's no such thing as a clean tone here, but the first channel of the BE module does get close with gain not far off zero, and you can easily set the four channels to step up through the gears all the way to boosted blitzkrieg on the HBE side. The BE really does sound totally 'boutique Marshall', and feels like a natural match for this output stage and the V30s.

All four modules can get monstrously loud, so it's just as well the master volume control is pretty good at keeping levels bearable without throwing a big beige blanket over everything. The cab-simulated DI output is impressive too, offering a lifelike replica of the sound in the room for mic-free recording or connection to the PA. You also get an effects loop and the option to use MIDI for more than just channel-switching, hardware permitting.

So, is the modular revolution ready to happen this time? We can't answer that, but while the SYN-50's power stage and speakers do bring a certain uniformity to every module's output – big, clear, thumpy, a little stiff for some tastes – it's certainly a viable alternative to a digital modelling amp… with bags more mojo.

LIKE THIS? TRY THESE...

This amp is the spiritual successor to the **Randall MTS RM50** and **Egnater Mod 50**, both of which you might still be able to find on the second-hand market. But a simpler approach would be to buy a bunch of preamp stompboxes and get your stage volume from a rackmount power amp such as the **Seymour Duncan PowerStage 700** (£599) or **Engl E840/50** (£979)

VERDICT

The Guitar Magazine

+ A simple way to cover all the classic tones without lugging multiple amps around
+ Amp and cab are well spec'd to provide a solid sonic foundation
+ All of the modules sound impressively 'real'

− Inevitably, it's not quite the same as switching to a different amp
− Getting modules in and out can be slightly fiddly

An impressive offering, and probably as close as you'll ever get to having a hand-picked collection of real top-class amps in one shell

8/10

CRIMSON
STAFF
CRIMSON
crimsonguitars.com
Build your dream

MERIS ENZO

The Guitar Magazine AWARD CHOICE 9/10

The digital upstarts at Meris want to make your guitar sound like... well, pretty much anything but a guitar. Richard Purvis goes exploring with a scarily versatile synth pedal

Synth players, they're an odd bunch, aren't they? Standing at the side of the stage, all stony-faced, making boopy-boop noises and nodding a bit. Hmm. Meanwhile we, the guitar heroes, summon the gods with a flurry of fingers while leaping from monitor to monitor like magnificent grimacing mountain goats. Well watch out, dear reader, because the Meris Enzo wants to turn you into one of those synth players. And while we've come across plenty of guitar-synthesiser pedals before, this one might just take you further away from traditional plank-plucking sounds – and in more different directions – than anything that's come before it.

This is Meris's fourth stompbox, and it follows the same form factor as the California maker's first three: the Mercury7 reverb, Ottobit Jr bitcrusher and Polymoon delay.

THE ENZO WORKS WITH BASS, KEYS AND JUST ABOUT ANY OTHER SOUND SOURCE YOU'RE IN THE MOOD TO PULVERISE

But as with those digital units, the functionality goes way beyond what you might expect from six knobs, two footswitches and a couple of little buttons. The controls themselves are digital, and each has a second function accessed by holding down the alt button.

In fact, there's more to it than that: hold that button while powering up the pedal (ie: plugging the included 9V adaptor into the back) and you enter 'global settings configuration mode'. This lets you change a host of things, including stereo setup, buffered or relay bypass, and – perhaps most importantly – how the expression input will work.

If you have a TRS expression pedal, you can use it to morph between two settings; find an extra £115 for the Meris Preset Switch and you can use that to stomp between four different sounds; or if you go for the Meris MIDI I/O interface (£99), you can plug in an external MIDI controller for storing and recalling presets galore.

All well and good, but what does the Enzo actually do? In short, it's a dual-oscillator synthesiser with two-tap modulated delay, three synth modes (poly, mono and arpeggiated), two envelope types (triggered and following) and a six-mode filter. The good news is you don't need to know what all that means to have fun with it. By the way, we've been calling it a 'guitar synth' pedal, but the Enzo isn't only aimed at us twangers. Everything it does is equally applicable to bass, keys and just about any other sound source you're in the mood to pulverise.

IN USE

Where do we begin? Manuals can only carry you so far… so we'll just

LIKE THIS? TRY THESE...

Other digital synthesising options include the **Electro-Harmonix Superego+** (**£230**) and **Boss SY-300** (**£507**)… or if you just want to make some barmy and distinctly un-guitar-like noises, you might try an analogue tone-mangler such as the **EarthQuaker Devices Data Corrupter** (**£225**)

KEY FEATURES

Meris Enzo

- **PRICE** £319
- **DESCRIPTION** Digital synth pedal. Made in USA
- **CONTROLS** Pitch, filter, mix, sustain, filter envelope, modulation rate; alt button for secondary knob functions, synth mode button (poly, mono, arpeggio or dry), tap tempo footswitch, bypass footswitch
- **FEATURES** Mono/stereo input, mono and stereo outputs, input for expression pedal or remote switch; switchable buffered or true (relay) bypass; powered by 9V mains supply only (included)
- **OPTIONAL ACCESSORIES** Preset Switch (four-way footswitch, £115), MIDI I/O (interface for up to four pedals, £99)
- **DIMENSIONS** 115 x 108 x 65mm
- **CONTACT** Audio Distribution Group **audiodistributiongroup.com meris.us**

take a deep breath, set all the knobs to halfway and see what comes out. Actually, what you get with the synth mode set to dry is not so scary at all: there's some whumpy bass oddness going on, but this is basically a gently modulated delay, with time set by the tap footswitch. A clockwise twist of the filter control removes the whump and replaces it with a funky envelope-following effect; then a tweak of the knob below that lets us adjust the envelope's sensitivity and direction. So far, so 'Q-Tron meets Memory Man'.

Tell you what, then – let's turn the delay off for now and focus on the tone-twisting stuff. Holding down alt and turning mix to zero kills the repeats, and now we might just be ready to dive into the monophonic synth. The initial difference is little more than a background fizz, but once we start dabbling with the mix, sustain and modulation controls, a whole world of Moog-style sounds – from buzzy square waves to giddy bleeps – begins to emerge.

The filter controls can make it as phat, as nasal or as shrieky as you want it to be, and Meris's 32-bit floating-point processing keeps everything tightly hi-fi.

That's still the case when we start tampering with the pitch: you've got two octaves up and two octaves down to play with, and the mix control lets you blend in your chosen interval. Tracking is immaculate with single notes in the lower register (or on a bass), but can disappear a little when you stray up the neck.

ON WE GO WITH SOUNDS RANGING FROM A WARPED CHURCH ORGAN TO A BLADE RUNNER TRIBUTE, VIA A 90S SYNTH PAD

Our tone is thoroughly messed up by now, and switching to polyphonic mode will make things a whole lot more disorientating, especially if we crank the modulation and – by holding down alt and turning the sustain knob – introduce ring modulation. We're going to need some delay to help us through this, so back it comes, and on we go with sounds ranging from a warped church organ to a *Blade Runner* tribute, via something reminiscent of a synth pad from a 90s house banger.

Oh dear, we're almost done and we haven't even mentioned the crazy arpeggiator mode, the swoopy portamento function or the stereo ping-pong delay yet. But we do need to talk about using the Enzo with an expression pedal, because this is where it reveals some of its most creative powers. Simply set one sound with your pedal in the up position, then push your toe down and set another; you can now blend between the two in mid-performance. This often works best if the two sounds you've selected aren't too different: changing only the filter settings, for example, results in some radical wah tones.

If nothing else, an expression pedal is an easy way to (temporarily) store two presets. Meris's four-way footswitch is a far better solution, and it's only a pity you can't use both at the same time – or even go from one to the other without unplugging the unit to change the global settings.

Clearly, this is about space-saving – and it's understandable – but it does make you wonder what a bigger version of this unit could do. Imagine it with a built-in expression pedal and a screen for scrolling through 200 presets… that really could make synth players of us all.

The Guitar Magazine VERDICT

+ A little magic box that offers a different sonic adventure every time you switch it on
+ Ultra-clear audio quality
+ Adding an expression pedal enables you to get really creative with dynamic effects

– Can be tough to navigate, especially if you don't invest in extra hardware for storing presets

A cupboard full of synth modules in guitar-stompbox form – this is the most inspiring pedal yet from Meris

9/10

STRONGER FOR LONGER

You Can Never Have Too Much of A Good Thing

The All-New Paradigm Slinky Bonus Pack

ERNIE BALL®
THE COLORS OF ROCK'N'ROLL®

9V
VOLUME
SUSTAIN
TONE
OUT
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ELECTRO-HARMONIX
TRIANGLE BIG MUFF PI

A recreation of a vintage classic released in celebration of Electro-Harmonix's 50th Anniversary. Michael Watts triangulates his position...

The Guitar Magazine AWARD CHOICE 9/10

We've waited years for EHX to add to its selection of Nano-format Big Muffs, and then all of a sudden three have turned up in very quick succession. We checked out the Green Russian and the Op-Amp (designed in conjunction with Billy Corgan) previously, and now we have this – a faithful recreation of the pedal that started it all, the venerable Triangle Big Muff Pi, named after the positioning of the three control knobs on the original design.

Originally released in 1969 as a logical progression from the existing Muff Fuzz, the Big Muff has become legendary for its ability to produce cello-like sustain for lead sounds, huge bass response for powerchord work and all manner of chaos and aggression for the more experimental player. The Big Muff tends to work best in partnership with an amp with a bit of midrange to show it to its full advantage and for this review, a hand-wired Vox AC4 was pressed into service.

IN USE

With the amp grumbling on the edge and a P-90-loaded SG in hand we set all three knobs on the Triangle Muff to 12 o'clock and hit the switch. An open E chord immediately summons up that familiar Big Muff roar with (as expected) most of the chord itself disappearing into a low-string powerchord. Such is the nature of the beast – indeed, anyone looking to hear every note in their major 7th and minor 9th chords may be shopping in the wrong department.

This is however, a classic Big Muff sound. A very good one, too. With more of a vintage feel than the Green Russian and Op-Amp offerings, this pedal covers some very pleasing classic-rock bases, from Python Lee Jackson top-fret histrionics to mid-period Mick Ronson-isms and, with the sustain dialled down a little and the tone up, it also does a convincing *Samba Pa Ti*. With the front pickup selected and the tone rolled off, we have a very vocal lead tone which, while it would require a boost to get it through a band mix on stage, is particularly addictive.

Perhaps the most noteworthy proponent of vintage Big Muff tones is of course David Gilmour and you'll be relieved to hear that the Triangle Big Muff Pi proves itself to be very much at home in a psychedelic-rock scenario. Indeed with the addition of some vintage-sounding delay, reverb and flange it becomes pretty otherworldly, with soaring high bends and growling bass notes.

It is perhaps in this context that the Triangle Big Muff Pi will find most favour. With myriad boutique pedal companies flooding Instagram with the promise of authentic vintage Muff tones at prices on a par with original vintage units, it is extremely encouraging to see Electro-Harmonix reminding the world of what it does best – characterful, musical and inspiring stompboxes at price-points that allow everyone to get a slice. Happy birthday EHX, and thanks for all the fuzz.

THE TRIANGLE BIG MUFF PI PROVES ITSELF TO BE VERY MUCH AT HOME IN A PSYCHEDELIC-ROCK SCENARIO

LIKE THIS? TRY THESE...

If you're after 70s hand-wired boutique, try the **Wren And Cuff Tri-Pi '70** (£160) or the **Jam Pedals Red Muck** (£169), which adds some Soviet aesthetics to the mix

The Guitar Magazine VERDICT

+ The one vintage Muff fans have been waiting for
+ Great classic-rock fuzz tones
– It will turn your extended chord voicings to mush. Just like the original!

A fitting way to celebrate EHX's birthday, the Triangle Muff will attract guitarists across numerous genres looking for authentic vintage fuzz/distortion tones

9/10

KEY FEATURES

Electro-Harmonix Triangle Big Muff Pi

- **PRICE** £93
- **DESCRIPTION** True-bypass fuzz pedal powered by 9V battery or mains PSU
- **CONTROLS** Volume, sustain, tone, bypass switch
- **DIMENSIONS** 70 x 115 x 54mm
- **CONTACT** Electro-Harmonix **www.ehx.com**

BASS
MIDDLE
TREBLE
BLUE
OFF
RED
VOLUME
AGGRESSION
GAIN
REVV
G3
G SERIES

REVV AMPLIFICATION G3 DISTORTION PEDAL

An amp-inspired hand-made box of heavy from Winnipeg, Canada that's aimed squarely at the rock brethren. Michael Watts reaches for his eyeliner and calls down the lords of metal…

Canadians have a reputation as polite people with a fondness for the quiet life. Every so often, however, an outlier is born with a thirst for making a ruckus. One such individual is Dan Trudeau whose company, Revv Amplification, has made a name for itself with an uncompromising, hand-wired, all-tube range of amplifiers. In fact, the G3 distortion pedal is directly inspired by the Purple channel on the Revv Amplification 120 and 100 amps – only this time in transistor form.

From the outset, the Revv G3 feels like a high-quality unit. The elegant metallic purple case, top-mounted jacks, smooth knobs and laser-etched labelling all suggest care and thought have gone into this pedal.

The control layout is intuitive enough with the EQ knobs on the top row and volume and gain underneath. Like on the Revv amps there is also a three-way Aggression switch bearing the legends blue, red and off.

Given that Revv amps have found favour with rock and metal players, we approach the G3 with a variety of guitars – laden with everything from Strat single-coils to P-90s, PAFs and EMGs – to put it through its paces.

IN USE

With all the controls set to 12 o'clock and the aggression switch disengaged we are greeted by an extremely impressive heavy rhythm sound that brings out every palm-muted nuance with an exceptional response and clear attack. This initial setting alone covers a variety of bases with ease, from Van Halen and Jake E. Lee to early Tom Morello. As we dial up the gain, the pedal retains its inherent character with no discernible loss of impact or attack and the EQ controls prove themselves very responsive throughout.

Flicking the aforementioned Aggression switch to Blue changes the character of the distortion to a more open, throaty roar. It's a fantastically heavy, present sound which would seem pretty tough to match. Until we flick the switch to red… Acknowledging and allowing for the subjectivity of taste, to this reviewer's ears and fingers this is an exhilaratingly good metal sound. Aggressive, immediate, heavy as hell… but never fizzy. As we explore down-tuned riffs from Lamb Of God and Opeth to Dimmu Borgir and Mastodon, we are rewarded with a sound that does it all, with very little knob-tweaking needed.

It can be genuinely inspiring to find a pedal that takes whatever you can throw at it. The Revv G3 does exactly that without sacrificing clarity or aggression. Dan Trudeau himself has said that 16 revisions went into this pedal's voicing. That hard work paid off. It is a testament to the G3's versatility that no matter what brand of rawk you hit it with, it handles it in a musical manner that encourages you to just play.

IT CAN BE GENUINELY INSPIRING TO FIND A PEDAL THAT TAKES WHATEVER YOU CAN THROW AT IT. THE G3 DOES EXACTLY THAT

LIKE THIS? TRY THESE...

Try the **Suhr Riot** (£190) and **Walrus Audio Iron Horse Version 2** (£192) for alternative multi-voiced takes on the distortion theme

The Guitar Magazine VERDICT

+ Excellent selection of hard rock and metal tones
+ High-quality build and a beautiful chassis
– Even at its cleanest, it's still pretty hairy

An impressive first shot at the pedal market from this boutique high-gain amp company. Worthy of audition for the well-heeled rocker looking for quality and versatility, this turns a clean amp into a flamethrower

9/10

The Guitar Magazine AWARD CHOICE 9/10

KEY FEATURES

Revv Amplification G3 Distortion Pedal

- **PRICE** £199
- **DESCRIPTION** Solid-state, mains-powered distortion pedal. Made in Canada
- **DIMENSIONS** 70 x 121 x 32mm
- **HARDWARE** Bass/middle/treble/volume/gain knobs and a 3-way Aggression mini toggle switch
- **CONTACT** Audio Distribution Group **audiodistributiongroup.com** **revvamplification.com**

M80
On The Move
Built for the modern musician going places.
CVL
Behind The Scenes
Expertly designed to support the creative lifestyle.
DESIGNED FOR CREATORS
PFX
For The Stage
Thoughtfully crafted for the perfect on-stage performance.
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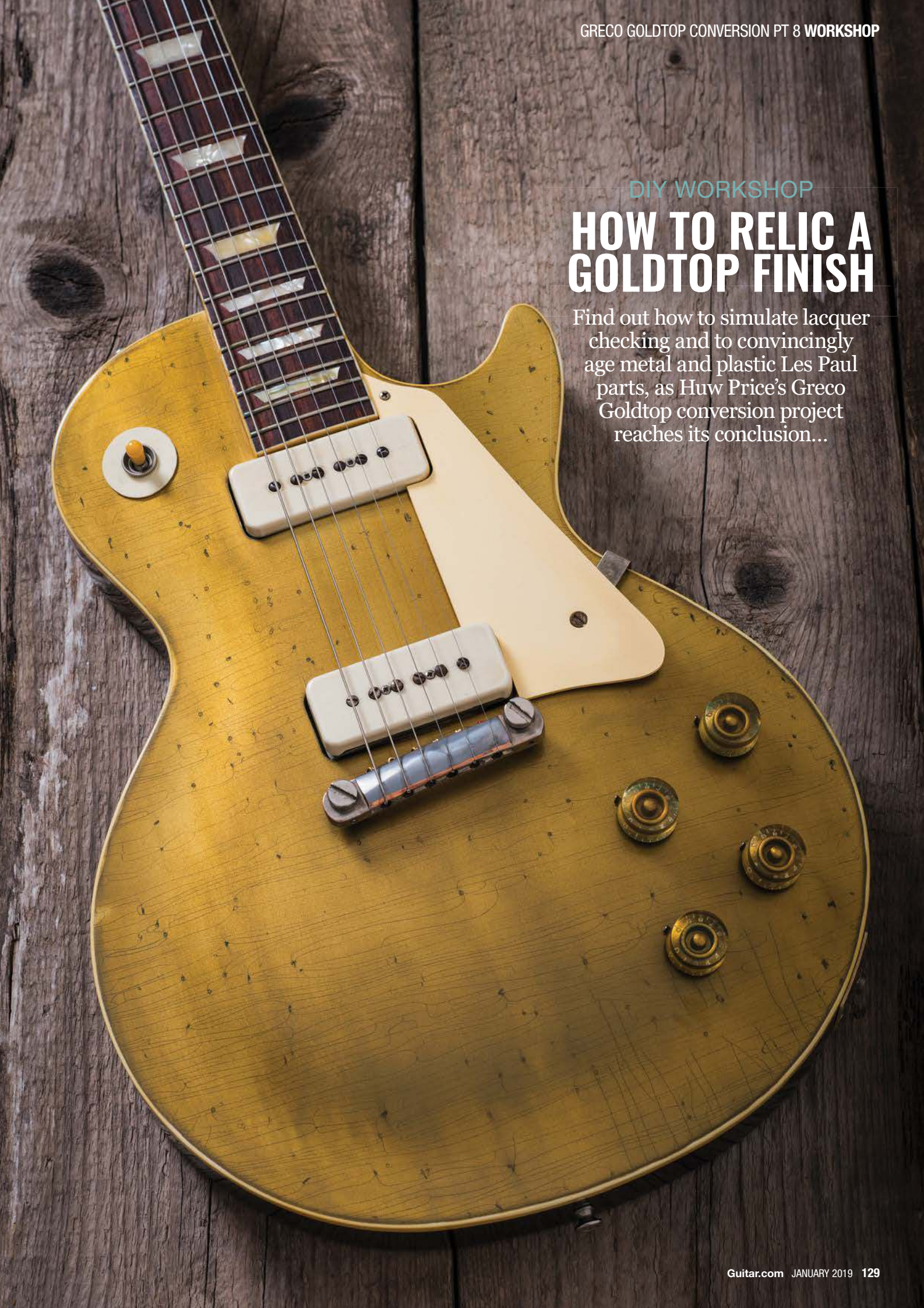
For more information visit www.monocreators.com
https://bnd.la/MONO



DIY WORKSHOP

HOW TO RELIC A GOLDTOP FINISH

Find out how to simulate lacquer checking and to convincingly age metal and plastic Les Paul parts, as Huw Price's Greco Goldtop conversion project reaches its conclusion...

1 Goldtop 'before' – with a few sets of keys, stones from the garden, a hammer and a nail punch at the ready, the pristine gold paintjob will soon be just a memory

Although relic'ing most Gibson and Fender-style guitars is a relatively straightforward procedure, I approached ageing the Greco's finish with some trepidation. No clear consensus seems to exist on how to correctly relic a Goldtop Les Paul and I suspect that's because producing authentic-looking results is a challenging process.

When you look at original examples, you can see massive variation in the extent of the lacquer checking, the colour of the gold and the amount of greening. Furthermore, when there is pronounced lacquer checking, it runs laterally, rather than following the grain along the body's length.

In the past, I've managed to produce results that I'm happy with by using inverted air dusters, and I'm able to control the look and intensity of the checking to some extent. But I've also learned that, using this method, I have very little – if any – control over the direction of the lacquer cracks. Where some degree of randomness is appropriate, that's fine, and using a borrowed '54 Les Paul as a reference, the compressed-air method is going to be okay for the back and sides. But it's not what I need for the top.

I toyed with the idea of finding someone with a big enough deep freezer to induce checking in a more gradual and natural way; but on realising that several freezing and thawing cycles may be needed, I decided against it. What's more, I'm not entirely confident that the Titebond glue that I used to veneer the top with has the ability to withstand this sort of treatment. This leaves me with only one option... razorblade checking.

CHECK YOURSELF

This's the way that Gibson Custom does it, and it means that I can control the look and direction of the checking lines. The downside is that I've never made any serious attempt to use this technique in the past, so I need to practise. To do this, I sourced a large piece of thin maple online and sprayed it with Goldtop lacquer, followed by tinted and clear gloss coats – just like the body.

A couple of months later, when the lacquer has fully cured, I divide the piece into quarters and put one piece through a few freeze-and-thaw

cycles to see what happens. As it turns out, the answer is nothing at all, so I'm back to the blades.

I use a craft knife rather than a razor, and very little pressure is needed. Press too hard and there's a danger of cutting through to the wood – and if the blade isn't sharp enough, you may end up with chipping rather than fine 'checking' lines. I always induce a few dents and dings before using air dusters for checking, because the crack lines tend to form around the damaged areas as they would on a vintage instrument, so I decide to do the same here. I also practise the curves and lines that characterise Goldtop checking patterns.

On close examination of vintage Les Pauls, it's also apparent that various types of checking tend to be present on originals. Some lines are deep and wide and look dark – often with some verdigris. Following similar patterns, there will also be finer checking lines that are lighter and less obvious. Then you may see a third type of hairline crack that actually goes with the wood grain to bridge the lateral cracks. It's all very complex and it's going to be a big challenge to get this looking right.

GOING GREEN

My other reason for making Goldtop test pieces is to try and figure out if there's a way to make the Goldtop lacquer darker and greener. It's actually pretty convincing for a later-50s look already, but the '54 we have on loan has a darker shade.

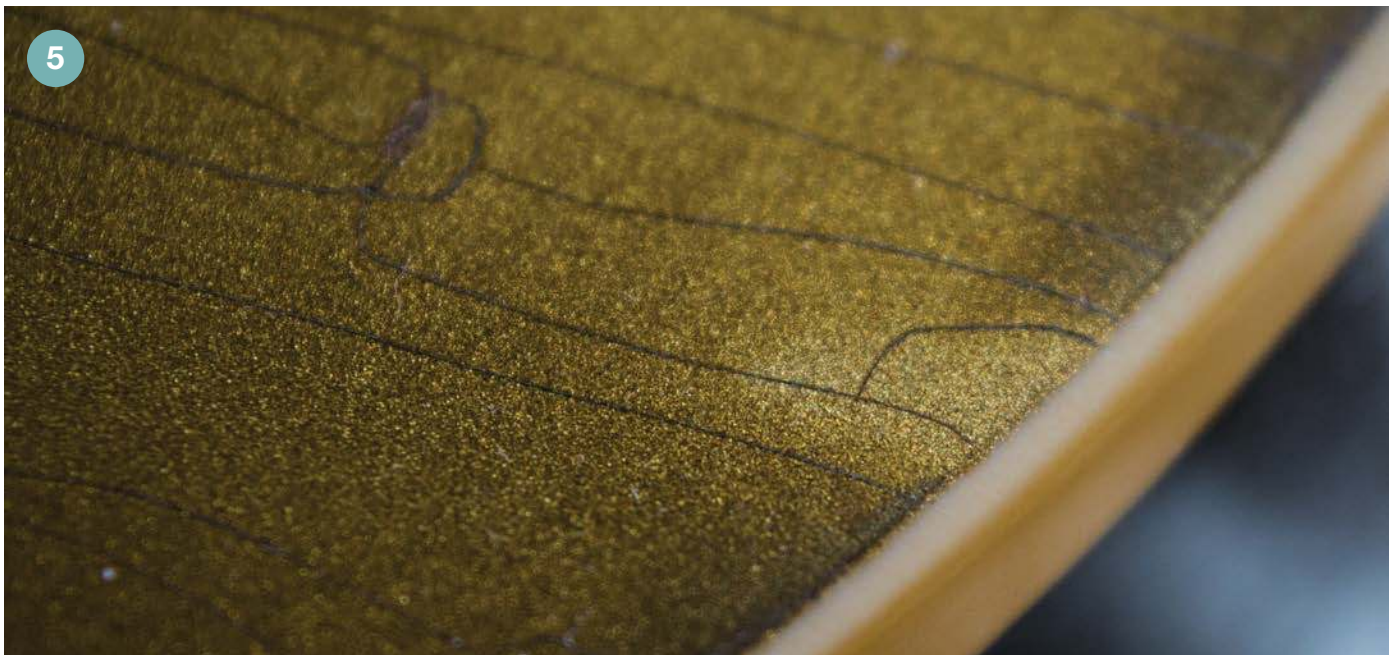
When relic'ing, I have always found it helpful to consider the factors that cause guitar finishes and parts to age naturally. Some, but not all, Goldtops acquire a greenish hue – Joe Bonamassa once pointed out that it's a clear tell that a vintage Goldtop has spent much of its life in the swampy Southern States, rather than the colder North or drier West of America.

Thinking it through, I figure that prolonged exposure to moisture, along with the constituent parts of salty sweat, have to figure significantly in the process of making the bronze particles in the gold finish oxidise. I decide to mix up a solution of salt and vinegar to test the theory on one of my scrap pieces.

Clearly wiping the solution onto the gold lacquer and hoping for the best isn't likely to work, because it

2 With the first checking lines done, the top is covered in tissue paper and a salty vinegar solution is applied

3 Wrapping the body with cling film prevents the tissue from drying out as it's set aside for 12 hours



4 The darkening effect of the salt-and-vinegar solution can be seen against this untreated test piece

5 There must have been an air bubble here because this bit at the edge has retained its natural colour, but it all adds to the character!

will dry off too quickly. Instead, I cover the piece with a single layer of tissue paper and dab the solution on top.

The tissue paper allows the liquid to spread out evenly and prevents pooling, and I finish up by wrapping the test piece with cling film to hold the moisture inside. It's set aside for 12 hours and when it's unwrapped, I'm thrilled to find that the gold lacquer has become darker and greener. Rather than dry it off immediately, I leave the piece to dry slowly, and over the following week the colour deepens and my checking-practice lines are pleasingly accentuated.

My only concern about doing this to the actual guitar is whether the salty vinegar solution will cause the veneer glue bond to break apart. If that happens, I will be obliged almost to start again. There's no point in risking it, so I glue a scrap piece of maple veneer onto a backing board, blast it with a few coats of lacquer and subject it to the salt-and-vinegar treatment. 12 hours later, the veneer has survived intact and I'm good to go.

As before, I cover the front of the guitar in tissue paper, mix up the saltiest vinegar solution I can and distribute it across the face. The tissue ensures that the liquid doesn't run off the curves and it clings fast to the lacquer. Again, I leave it for about 12 hours, inspecting the guitar every so often to ensure that the veneer isn't lifting.

Besides a bit of lifting around the neck-pickup volume-pot hole and a couple of new cracks next to the bridge-post bushings, the veneer comes through the process unscathed and the guitar already looks a lot older.

For me, this is easily the most satisfying moment of the project so far. The colour change isn't too even, and it's noticeably darker around the binding edges, but I couldn't have hoped for better. The random nature of the results is rather like forced lacquer checking, where a body you've beaten up can go from looking a bit rough, to elegantly aged, in a matter of minutes.

Now, if you investigate the chemical makeup of sweat, you might reasonably conclude that even more authentic results could be possible if you are prepared to urinate on your guitar. As a DIY relic enthusiast, I am prepared to

tolerate my guitar smelling like a fish-and-chip shop for a few weeks, but bodily fluids are where I draw the line. However, if anybody does feel inclined to try this approach, we expect to hear from you.

CRACKING ON

The checking lines that were already cut have been highlighted by the vinegar solution, but I decide to treat the top with some green-tinted T-Cut paintwork restorer. This further accentuates the lines and various dents, and leaves a greenish residue that I like.

Next, I set about adding more lateral checking lines, putting very little pressure on the blade because I want these lines to be finer and shallower. Ideally, they should only be visible when they catch the light from certain angles. As before, it's slow and painstaking work and I probably spend two whole days doing the razorblade checking.

Once I'm done, I give the top a very quick blast with an inverted air duster to induce smaller checking lines that run between the lateral checking lines. For a first attempt, I'm reasonably pleased with the results, but using a blade to create complex checking patterns certainly does take practice.

Using a real '54 for reference, the back-and-side checking is closer to the way vintage Fender finishes tend to check. Although I use a blade on the rear of the headstock, the rest is done with a can of compressed air. I also add more dents and chip away at the edges, before finishing up with some black boot polish.

PLASTIC FANTASTIC

Rather than invest in expensive relic parts, I decided to buy a P-90 pickguard from Crazyparts in Germany (www.crazyparts.de) and source a set of bone-white P-90 covers from an eBay seller. All together, they cost me less than £20, but they do need some work.

The pickguard colour is pretty good as a starting point, but it's obvious that the pickup cover cutouts aren't quite the right shape. The corners were probably done with a metric-sized router bit, but Gibson probably used a half-inch bit. Since I own a half-inch bit, I decide to recut the corners on my router table.

It's a similar story with the pickup covers, because they are way too tall and the corners are too square. Back

6 A close-up view of the finished lacquer checking under studio lighting

7 With the checking processes complete, there are deep and fine lines going crossways, plus even finer air-duster lines bridging the gaps

8 Placing the repro pickguard placed behind a genuine '54 pickguard shows how the pickup cover cutouts are different

9 A bearing-guided half-inch router bit corrects the cover cutouts for a vintage look

10 The repro covers have more depth and there's no notch for the bridge pickup

in the day, Gibson would also notch out the sides of the bridge-pickup covers. Having measured and marked out the required heights, I cut the bottoms off the covers with a small hand saw, and then clean up the edges with sandpaper. The corners are rounded over with a file and then sanded and buffed smooth.

Close examination of an original bridge-pickup cover suggests that Gibson notched them out using nippers. I use my Crimson fret nippers (crimsonguitars.com) and the resulting marks look much like those on the vintage cover. Both the pickup covers and the pickguard are sanded with 800-grit paper followed by 1,500 and 2,000-grit, then 4,000, 6,000 and 8,000-grit Micro-Mesh. This turns glossy surfaces into a dull sheen and makes the plastic more receptive to staining.

I start with a 50/50 solution of water and acetone and mix brown and vintage amber ColorTone stains, depending on the shade I'm trying to achieve. I also use it on the buttons of a set of Kluson tuners that are destined for this guitar. Two or three applications are usually needed to achieve the desired look, and I dab a dark-brown, oil-based grain filler around the polepiece screw holes in the covers and along the edges of the pickguard.

DISHWASHER SAFE

While filing and sanding my repro wrapover bridge, I discover a layer of copper between the aluminium and the nickel-plated surface. Vintage Gibson bridges don't have that layer, so I don't want it, either. I seek the expert advice of metal-plating professionals, and I discover that to apply nickel plating without the copper requires a technique called electroless plating. It's quite specialised and turns out to be prohibitively expensive.

Instead, I use a buffing wheel on a Dremel with chrome polish to buff my way through the exposed copper and surviving nickel plate

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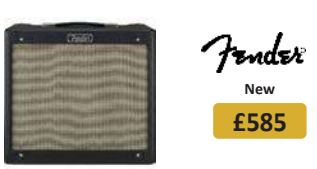

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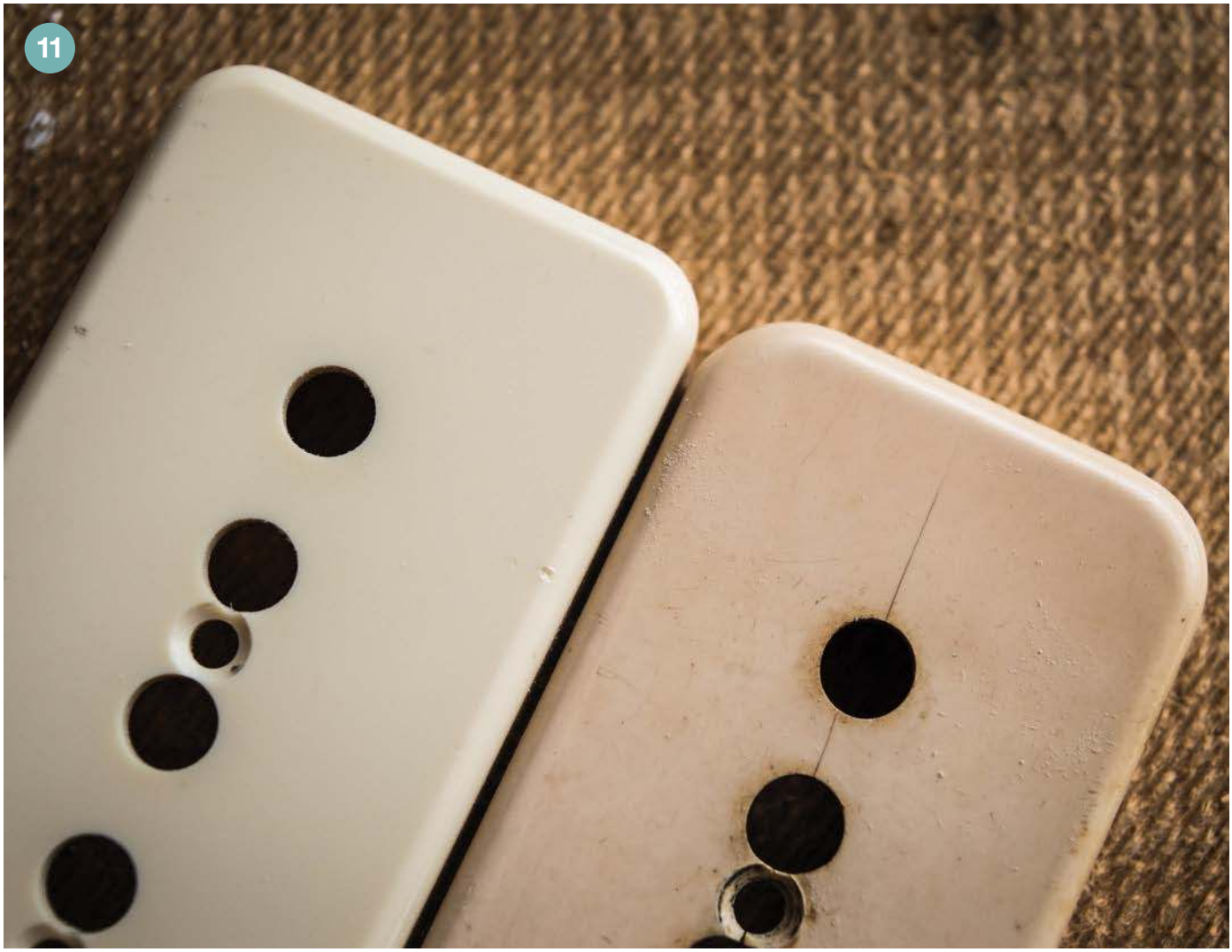
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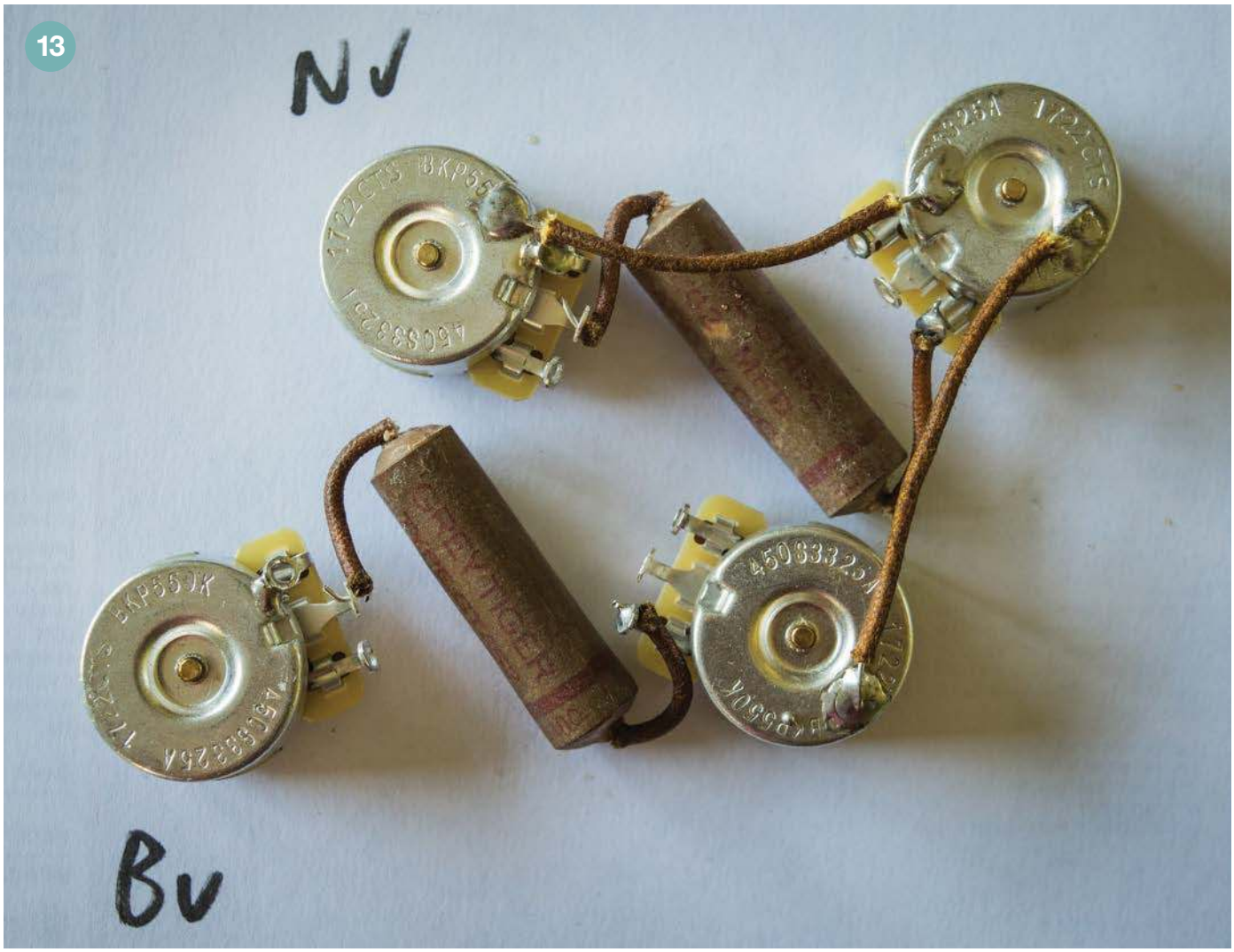


to expose the aluminium. At the end of the process, I'm left with a very shiny aluminium bridge that looks fine, but is wrong for this guitar. That evening, I throw it into the dishwasher and it emerges the following morning looking more appropriately weathered.

Getting hold of a nickel-plated Les Paul pickguard bracket with the correct dimensions proves difficult, but I find a chrome-plated one in my parts bin. Of course the chrome looks wrong, so I let it sit in hydrochloric-acid fumes for a few hours and I'm more than happy with the result.

All the nickel screws and knob pointers are knocked back with PCB etchant and washed under running water. Before starting out, I wipe them down thoroughly with rubbing alcohol to remove any greasy fingerprints and the results are almost instantaneous.

I chose a Tyson Tone 53-Wraptail P-90 set for this project and since the only parts that will be visible are the pole screws, relic'ing can be confined to those. This time, I go with the electronic method, using a 9V battery and salt water. With a steel screw on the positive and the pole screws connected to the negative, the results are almost instantaneous as the shiny plating turns black. I'm careful to relic only the screw heads and once they've dried, I coat them with WD-40.

ALL TOGETHER NOW

Since I had this guitar up and running before I sprayed it, putting it back together is straightforward – besides making a new 50s-style nylon nut, which is a tough job. Having tested a bunch of potentiometers – including the recently introduced Vintage Inspired pots – nothing beats Bare Knuckle 550Ks when it comes to matching vintage values and taper.

They also have a free, but not too loose, feel that makes adjustments quick and accurate. The way the controls respond is fundamental to the vintage Gibson experience. If you're prepared to contemplate spending £250 on a top-notch set of vintage replica pickups, why would you balk at £7 per pot? Although they don't look like the old Centralabs Gibson used, they certainly sound like them, especially when wired to mimic the way that Gibson wired Les Paul controls in the mid 1950s.

FINAL THOUGHTS

At the end of any project, I always feel that there are things I could have done better. If I ever do another Goldtop, I'll use a little more tinted clear lacquer and press a little harder on the first round of razorblade checking. Other than that, I'm pretty pleased with the way this one turned out. The Tyson Tone P-90s sound fantastic and going the extra mile to increase the neck depth and alter the neck profile was certainly worth the effort.

As great as Burst-style Les Pauls can be, P-90-loaded Lesters have their own special qualities. This one may not be the real deal, but it's probably as close as I'll ever get, and it certainly does the business.

NEXT MONTH...

Huw turns his hand to converting an old valve film projector amplifier into something much more musical, for under £500…

11 Compared to a vintage pickup cover, the repros have squarer corners

12 Filing the corners, applying stain and grainfiller and relic'ing the pickup pole screws gives things a more vintage look

13 Using Bare Knuckle 550K pots and home-made capacitors, most of the control wiring is done outside the guitar with the parts mounted on cardboard

UP AND DOWN

One note up and one note down can be a great way to ornament a chord sequence. Rod Fogg breaks out the decorations...

Let's get started with figure 1, which has an A major chord with an added ninth. You play this one with your first finger flat and use the underside of that finger to mute the top E string. Then play A, followed by A major seven, and return to A to create a two-bar phrase. What we have is a decorated pattern based around an A major chord, starting a note above and then dipping down a note below.

Figure 2 illustrates the same idea, but this time on a D chord – so strum just the top four strings. Any rhythm will do, but you could try chang chang-a-chang – down, down up down in 6/8 time. Major seventh chords don't get much of an outing in rock music, so it's good to find a way to use them to add movement to what'd otherwise be a static D major chord.

In figure 3, we have a similar idea on E, but this time, we're starting on Esus4. The sus4 drops down a note to a standard E chord, before moving down to Eadd9 and back. One note up, one note down: but this time encircling the third of the chord. If you play

Figure 1

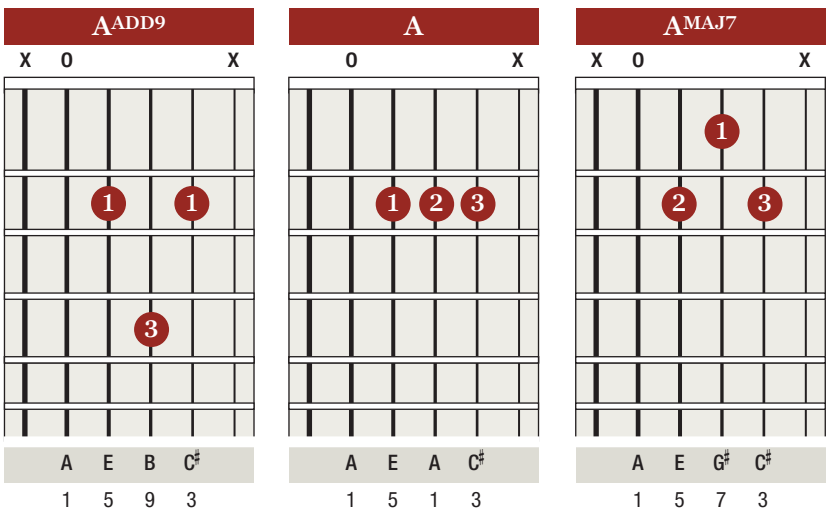


Figure 2

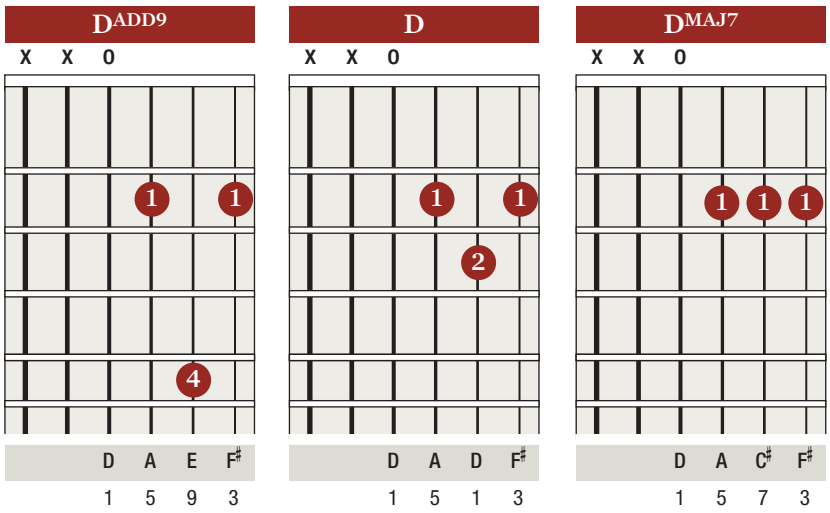


Figure 3

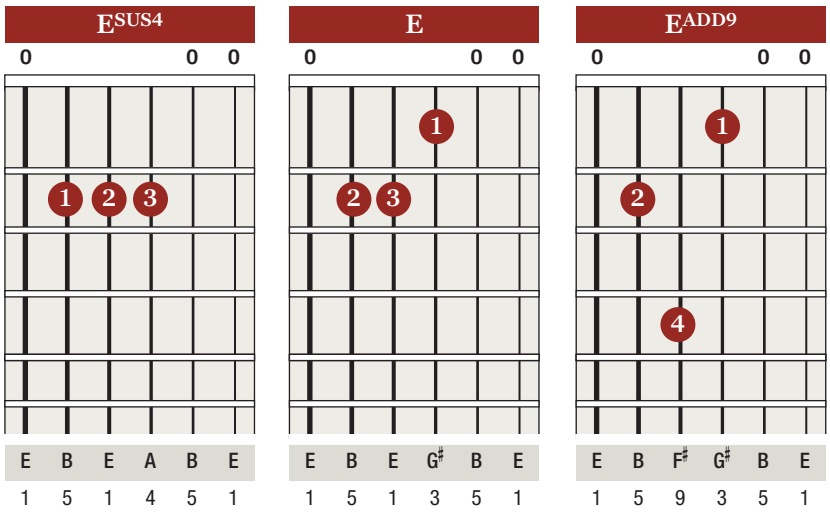
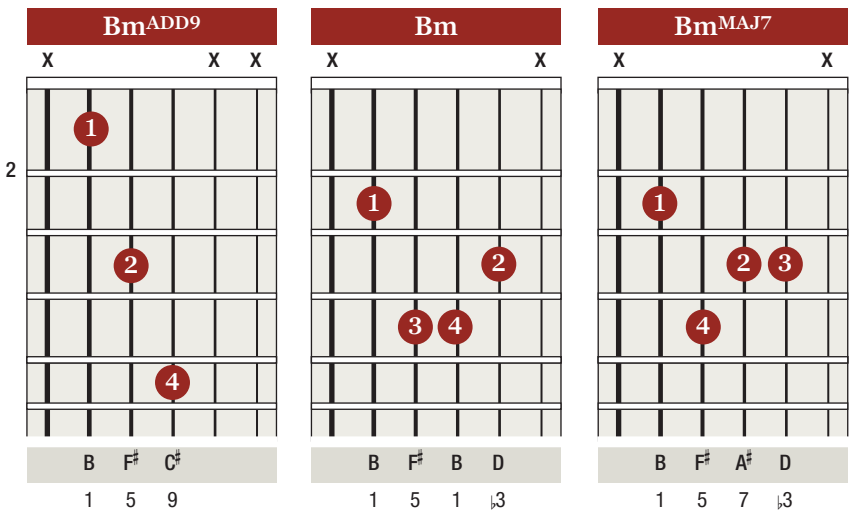


Figure 4



figures 1, 2 and 3 and then return to figure 1 you will have an eight-bar sequence.

B minor works as a substitute for the D chords from figure 2. Enter figure 4, with a slightly fudged version of the Bmadd9; we've had to leave the third out of the chord (it's on the B string) because this low on the guitar, the stretch is all but impossible. This version does at least keep the integrity of the melodic movement on the G string. As before, we continue with a standard B minor and then the seldom-seen B minor major seven (Bm maj7). This is a crunchy, dissonant chord, but the moment passes quickly as you end the sequence back on B minor.

Using the B minor chords from figure 4 in an eight-bar sequence, we would start on A, figure 1, progress to B minor and E, figures 4 and 3, and then return to A. Now let's try this same long sequence but starting in D major, with figure 2. Next would come E minor, so cue figure 5, which takes us around the same add9 and minor major seven sequence as figure 4. The D sharp is very dissonant against the open E but again, we move swiftly back to a more wholesome-sounding E minor. Moving on, the next chord would be A major, but starting on Asus4 in the same way that we used Esus4 in figure 3. There are only two chords in this example, because you know A major already.

Leaving this month's theory moment quite late, you may have realised that what we are doing here is playing chord I, chord ii, chord V, and then back to chord I. Each chord is decorated or ornamented by the note up/note down pattern.

You can play this note up/note down trick on any of the remaining open-string major chords. For example, it works well on both C and E major. If we want to play the whole sequence with ii and V, however, the best bet is G major. Figure 7 gets things going with beautifully chiming and opened-out Gadd9 and Gmaj7. Notice that on all of these chords, the open A string is muted with the underside of whichever finger is on the sixth string. Then we have the same sequence on A minor, chord ii, in figure 8. Chord V in this key is D major, and you can see the start of the sequence in figure 9. Drop the top note down one fret and you will have a standard D major chord. Release the finger on the top string and let it ring open and you will have Dsus2, and then it's back to figure 7 to complete the sequence in G major.

At this point, we have taken a I-II-V-I chord sequence and played it in three different keys – A, D and G major. Try them one after the other, without stopping. Now comes the clever bit. Skip out the last bar of the final G major section and go to an E major chord. This will then function as the dominant, chord V, to A major and you can go round the whole sequence again. We've said it before – chords are wonderful things...

Figure 5

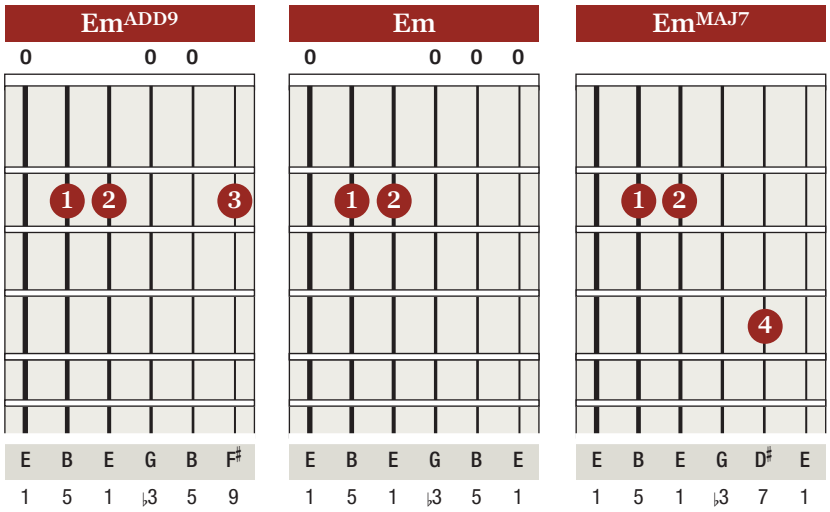


Figure 6

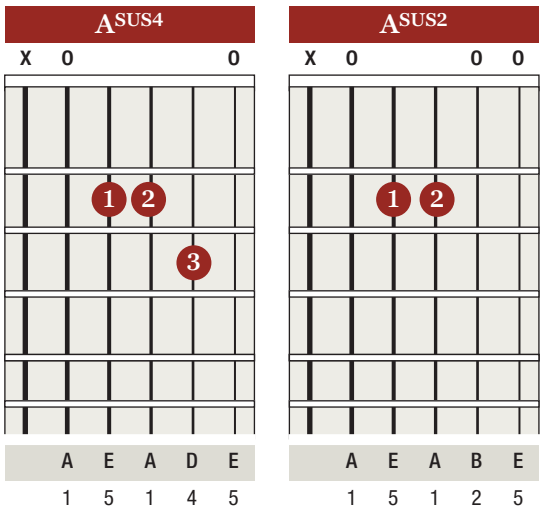


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Figure 7

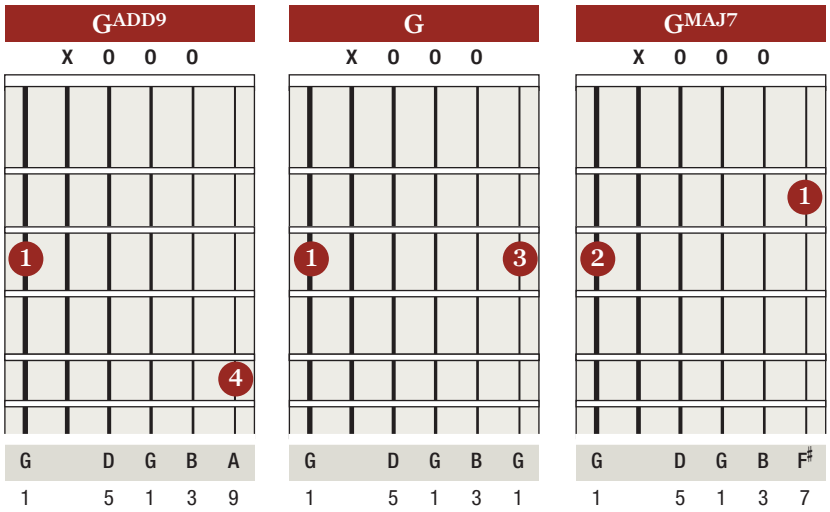


Figure 8

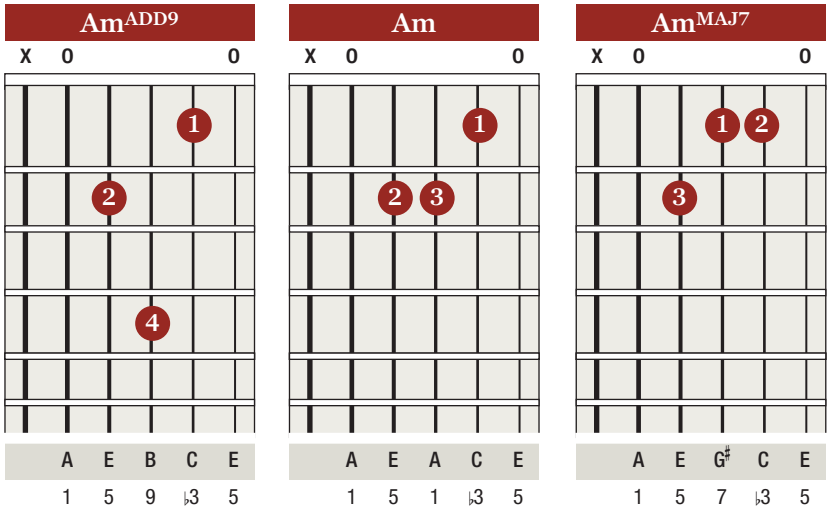
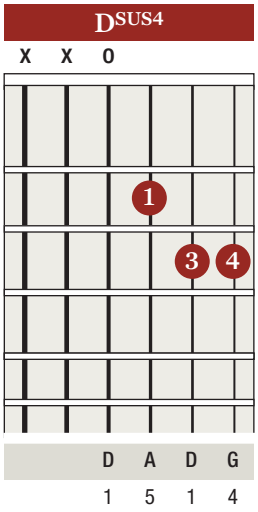
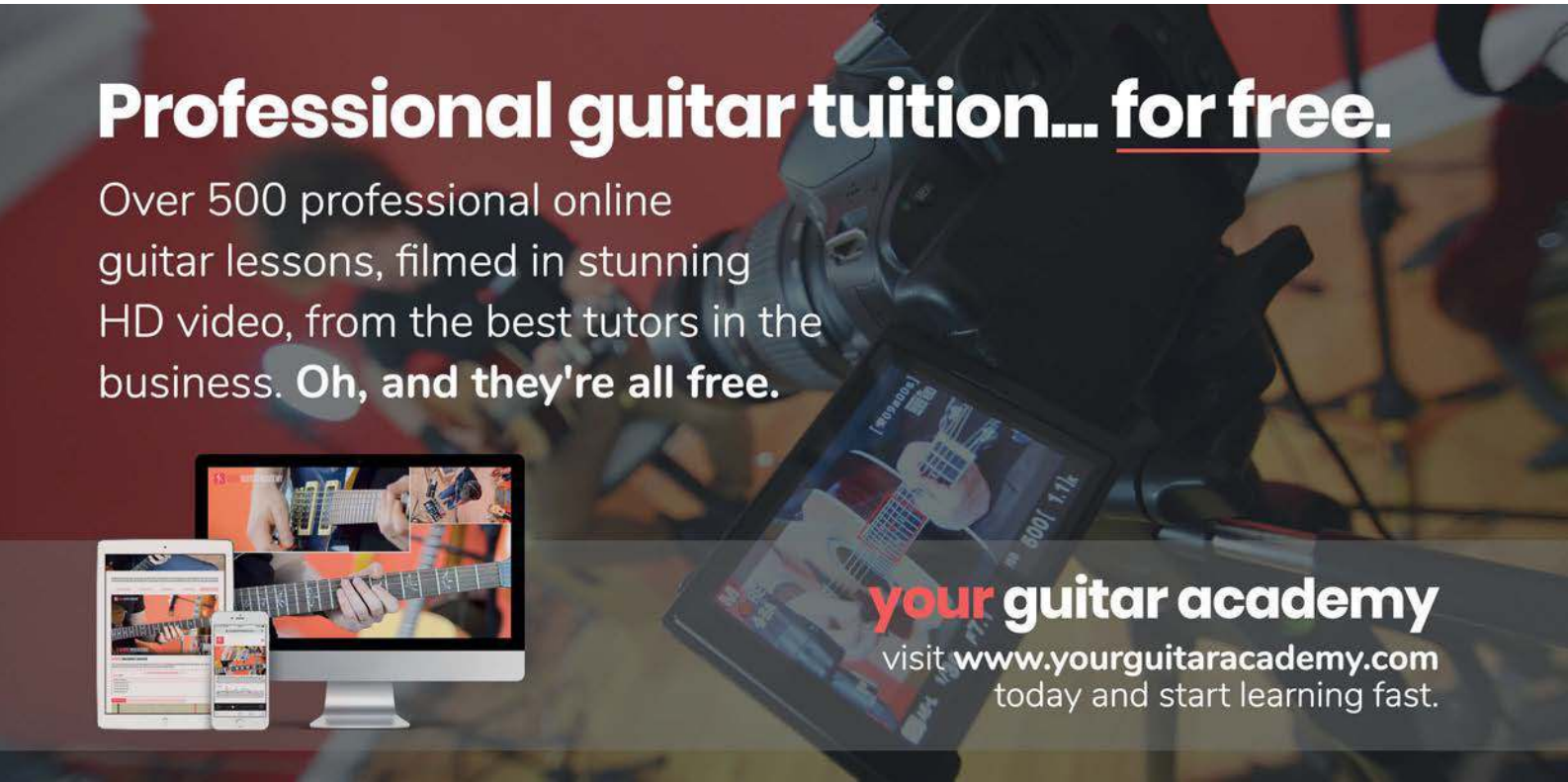


Figure 9





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Fretbuzz

Your letters. This month: that special Kaye, putting some Sparkle in your life, and in defence of Mick Abrahams...

LETTER OF THE MONTH

THERE'S SOMETHING ABOUT MARY

Dear *TGM*, I'm totally in accord with Huw Price in the December issue, with his assessment of the Mary Kaye model as the most desirable Strat. For a while, my ultimate piece of Fender eye-candy was the all-gold, 1950s Homer Haynes model, which the Custom Shop recreated in 1989. A bit beyond my financial reach at the time, but salvation came when the company produced a very close, Mexican-made replica of that instrument to mark its 50th Anniversary in 2004. I bought one like a shot and still have it. Then the Mary Kaye came to my attention.

How I'd missed it before, I just don't know, but I was hooked. Trouble was, when a very similar guitar was reissued in 1987, it didn't even register on my radar – to this day, I don't recall seeing one come up for sale and a Custom Shop order is still beyond my means. It looked like that situation was something I was going to have to live with until about five years ago, when I saw a Tokai Japan instrument that's that seemed to tick all the Mary Kaye boxes, but was affordable to me. I really don't fret (ouch!) too much about it not having Fender on the headstock!

Stephen Davies, via email

TGM **There's something about the Mary Kaye Strat that's captured many players' imaginations. For a pretty affordable option with 'Fender' on the headstock, try to track down a 60th Anniversary Classic Player '50s Stratocaster from 2014. Its Desert Sand finish isn't a million miles from aged blonde, it has gold hardware and a maple neck, and you could swap the gold pickguard for a white one. Either way, enjoy your Overdrive Strap!**

WRITTEN A LETTER OF THE MONTH?

Then you win an Overdrive Straps Seatbelt Strap* worth £35! This hand-made, classic guitar strap is made from the strongest safety-belt material, with full-grain belting leather on the tips. For more information, visit www.overdrivestraps.com

LOTM prize is subject to availability and may change

HUW TO ME, ARE EVERYTHING

Dear *TGM*, I recently fitted some McNelly SparkleTron pickups to my PRS Bernie Marsden SE – James (at James' Home Of Tone) is now offering them in humbucker size, and I opted for the unpotted version. They have totally transformed the guitar, with a sweet clarity together with an incisive tone that I love.

I considered several options, but went with these mainly because of Huw's excellent review – the same reason I got some Stagger Swaggers by the same maker previously, and subsequently some of his A2 Signatures for my Telecaster. Huw continues to be my 'guru' and helps elevate your publication to No.1 spot. Loving the mag and keep up the good work.

Dave Kirkpatrick via email

TGM **We're glad you're so pleased with the SparkleTrons, Dave. We were certainly impressed when we reviewed them back in 2016, and Huw remarked that they were pretty much everything that you could want from a Filter'Tron-style pickup and more. It bears repeating that a pickup swap is one of the most straightforward ways to totally transform your guitar's tone. Whether it's an upgrade or, as in Dave's case, switching to a different kind of pickup altogether, the results can make you fall in love with a guitar all over again.**

JETHRO SULLIED?

Dear *TGM*, I've just been reading the December 2018 edition of *The Guitar Magazine* (full of goodies, as usual) but, while reading a piece on Jesse Wells, I noticed he made some disparaging remarks about the great Mick Abrahams, to the tune of "he [Wells] could have done a better job", and that "this guy cannot keep up with Ian Anderson".

Well, let me tell you sonny, I saw Abrahams with Tull in July 1968 – I was six feet away from him in the front row at the Cooks Ferry Inn in North London, and he was *smokin'*! His unique style was a fusion of jazz and blues, he was playing some killer diminished runs (amongst shitloads of other amazing stuff) and was in a class of his own.

I think this young man needs to open his ears before he opens his cakehole!

Rob 'Angelo' Sawyer via email

TGM **Hi Rob. To be fair to Jesse, his comments about Mick Abrahams were things that he admitted to thinking when he was 13 years old and rather cocksure and forthright about his own abilities. As he said in the interview: "I separate myself from the eighth-grade asshole me," who was disparaging about Abrahams' guitar abilities. We've probably all said a few things about musicians and artists back in our teenage years that we ended up cringing at later… put it down to youthful exuberance! Anyway, all's well that ends well (or should that be Welles?) as Jesse's grown up to be an interesting player in his own right.**

HAVE YOUR SAY! Write to us via snail mail, ***The Guitar Magazine***, BandLab UK Limited, Piccadilly House, London Road, Bath BA1 6PL or email **editors@guitar.com**. Alternatively, get in touch via social media on Facebook or Twitter.

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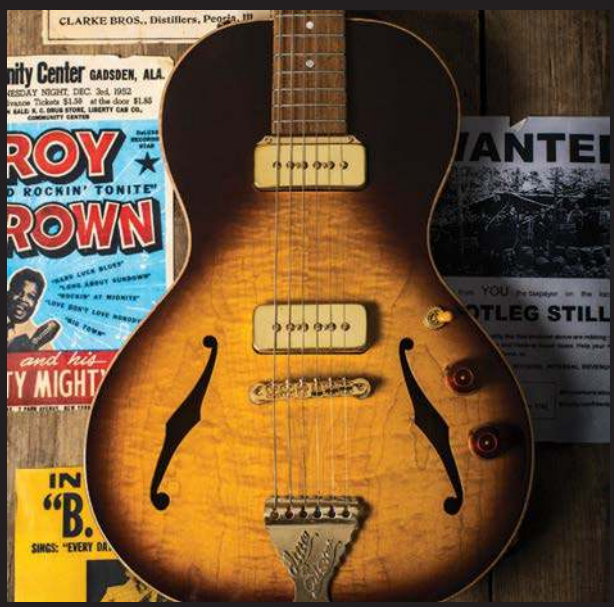

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RY X

The Australian guitarist and soundtracker of adverts talks Danos, shack-building, and open-air mic mishaps...

1 I couldn't live without my...
"Vintage Danelectro/Silvertone with lipstick pickups. Such a beautiful, rich sound and tone. I've carried it with me so many times around the world, and it has informed a lot of the sound elements I create with guitars and loops and reverbs."

2 In another life, I'd have been...
"Surfing. It's the other half of my heart. I travelled surfing before I did with music, and I can imagine I would be working hard toward building a shack near the sea and picking fruit from the trees around me... Actually, I'm working toward that, either way!"

3 The moment it all started...
"In my teens, growing up in the surf and skate scene, I fell into a love of grunge and punk. That was my world through those formative years. Yet I ached for something else... and when I heard Jeff Buckley, that was it. I knew what I wanted to lean toward, and how to do it with a power built within fragility, too."

4 The one that got away...
"I think we all have those ones, no? I've been pretty good about holding onto my synths, pedals, and old guitars. But I do remember pulling the top off some amazing synths about 10 years ago thinking I could make them sound better, and alas... no more sound... turns out they worked better without me!"

5 My Spinal Tap moment...
"Oh man, I remember a terrible summer... walking onto stages with 5,000 people booing you at festivals because the mic isn't on is rather embarrassing."

6 The best advice that I've ever been given...
"I was told early on by some dear friends and peers, people I respected for succeeding doing their craft, to trust that all I made was me – was my style. To not question it, or define it with genre, but to allow all aspects of it to be expressed. I trusted that. It took some time to sink in, but I work to allow that to be my path each day. And I have been able to span across genres and styles so much because of it. If it's you, it's you."

7 The first thing I play when I pick up a guitar...
"I actually play pieces of my own songs if I'm trying out a guitar that I'm thinking of buying. Because I know what it will be used for, I know what I want it to sound like, and I know that I'll want to use it on tour... and then it will become an extension into writing and studio work as a unique sound of its own."

8 The most important thing on my rider...
"Healthy food. Taking care of the body is really important touring. It's not an easy thing to travel so much and push the body so hard. So local and organic foods, fresh produce to make pressed juices, ginger for teas, et cetera, become staples of health."

9 My guilty pleasure...
"I wish I had something juicier here! I listen to a lot of ambient music. Explorative music. Usually no lyrics or voice, long pieces that explore soundscapes... but sometimes it's great to have a bit of banging techno, too!"

10 If I could just play one thing...
"I love Afro-jazz – the rhythms, the grooves. I would love to have some time to put into learning some of those aspects and sit in with players from that genre... play for six hours at a time, sweaty and locked in! It sounds like a beautiful contrast and release from the kind of shows I create, too – maybe that's why it's so appealing."

Ry X's new album, *Unfurl*, is out 15 February 2019 on Infectious Music

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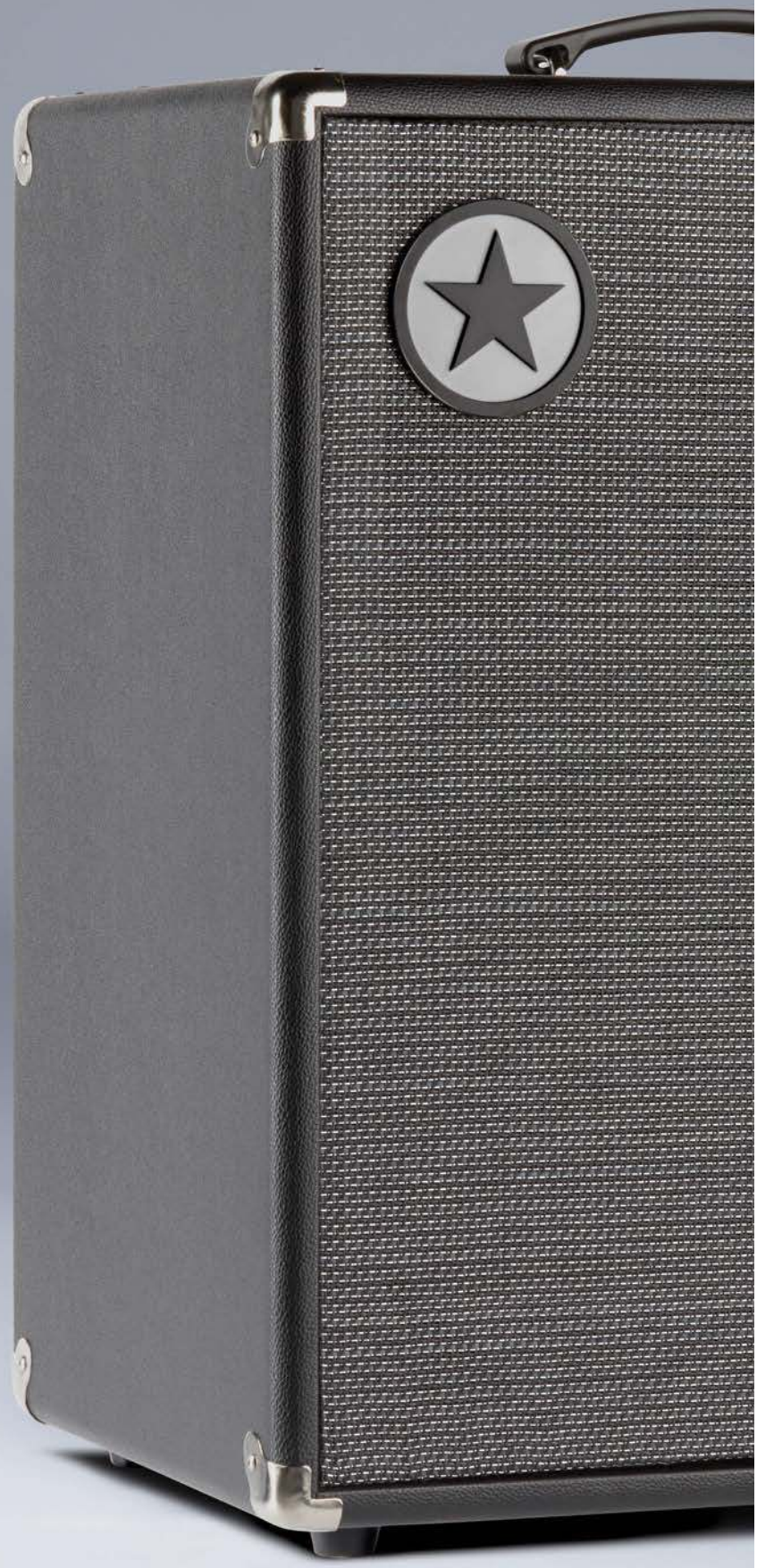

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